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978-0-521-11414-1 - Baudelaire in 1859: A Study in the Sources of Poetic Creativity

Richard D. E. Burton

Excerpt

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## I

## BAUDELAIRE AT HONFLEUR

*Le génie du lieu*

‘Honfleur a toujours été le plus cher de mes rêves’

In mid-January 1859, some three months before his thirty-eighth birthday, Charles Baudelaire at last made the move which, planned with mounting anxiety and impatience for twelve months or more, he had had repeatedly and to his ever greater frustration to defer: he left Paris and went to live with his mother. Following her second husband's death in April 1857, Madame Aupick had moved to the tiny port of Honfleur on the Seine estuary opposite Le Havre, where the General had bought a modest holiday villa in 1855; it was here, in the ‘Maison-Joujou’, as her son would later call it, that in August 1857 she had read with horror reports of Baudelaire's arraignment, trial and conviction for publishing six allegedly obscene poems in *Les Fleurs du mal*, the work on which the poet had counted not merely to establish his literary reputation but also to win back the maternal indulgence and respect that all too often – or so he thought – had been denied him during Aupick's lifetime. To his dismay, the banning of the poems, far from eliciting Madame Aupick's sympathy, appeared to complete their estrangement. Shortly after Aupick's death, and clearly influenced by friends and relatives of her late husband, Madame Aupick had announced that under no circumstances would she permit Baudelaire to live with her; for Baudelaire, who was, by his own later admission, expecting her to propose just such an arrangement, this was a further humiliating rejection to add to the contemptuous rebuff that he had already endured at the hands of other mourners at his stepfather's funeral.<sup>1</sup> To cap it all, Madame Aupick had refused to accept the copy of *Les Fleurs du mal* that Baudelaire wanted to send her; it was as though she was making common cause with his persecutors and, like the denatured Madonna-figure of

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'Bénédiction', thrusting her poet-son, that stunted pseudo-Christ conceived anything but immaculately, away from her to rot and fester in the outer darkness. The wound went deep; even after their reconciliation, Baudelaire would still envy the support that his friend and publisher Poulet-Malassis was receiving from *his* mother when he in his turn was at odds with the law ('la mienne, dans de pareilles aventures, se tournait du côté des persécuteurs'),<sup>2</sup> while in 1861 he was ready to see his whole life in terms of maternal rejection and vilification: 'Tu es toujours armée pour me lapider avec la foule. Tu [*sic*] cela date de mon enfance, comme tu sais. Comment donc fais-tu pour être toujours pour ton fils le contraire d'une amie, excepté dans les affaires d'argent?'<sup>3</sup> But, by early 1858, Madame Aupick with few friends in Honfleur and, at sixty-five, doubtless fearing for the future, overcame her misgivings and the resistance of the Aupick clan and invited Baudelaire to join her in Honfleur. Baudelaire's joy and relief at his reinstatement knew no bounds, the more so since, though he had dropped heavy hints to her ('Nous sommes actuellement bien seuls et bien faibles', he had written to her in late December 1857, 'Si nous essayions une bonne fois d'être heureux l'un par l'autre?'),<sup>4</sup> the decisive initiative had come from her and, to all appearances, sprang from spontaneous maternal affection and nothing else. With his literary reputation, it seemed, definitively besmirched, his brief, botched liaison with Madame Sabatier ending in recrimination and self-disgust and in his day-to-day existence tyrannized by creditors, publishers and the ubiquitous presence of the pernicky and fatuously loquacious Ancelle, Baudelaire was, by the end of 1857, as close to total despair as at any time since the suicide attempt – if such it was – of June 1845. It was sheer misery, not the emotional blackmail at which he had become all too skilled, that, on 30 December 1857, caused him to open his heart to his mother as never before:

Ce que je sens, c'est un immense découragement, une sensation d'isolement insupportable, une peur perpétuelle d'un malheur vague, une défiance complète de mes forces, une absence totale de désirs, une impossibilité de trouver un amusement quelconque. Le succès bizarre de mon livre et les haines qu'il a soulevées m'ont intéressé un peu de temps, et puis après cela je suis retombé. Vous voyez, ma chère mère, que voilà une situation d'esprit passablement grave pour un homme dont la profession est de produire et d'habiller des fictions. – Je me demande sans cesse: à quoi bon ceci? A quoi bon cela? C'est là le véritable état de spleen.<sup>5</sup>

Their severity and duration apart, none of these feelings was, of course, exactly unfamiliar to Baudelaire. What is new is the

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intensity – now that the possibility of an accessible and entirely viable *là-bas* has opened up before him – with which he identifies ‘spleen’ with living *ici-même* in Paris: ‘Il me tarde sincèrement d’être hors de cette maudite ville où j’ai tant souffert et où j’ai perdu tant de temps’, he wrote to his mother in February 1858, ‘Qui sait si mon esprit ne se rajeunira pas là-bas, dans le repos et le bonheur?’<sup>6</sup> No longer the necessary scene of his literary activities or even an indispensable, if ambiguous, source of inspiration, Paris and the ‘cruelle vie que j’y mène depuis plus de seize ans’ now appears to him as ‘l’unique obstacle à l’accomplissement de tous mes projets’.<sup>7</sup> At Honfleur, it seemed, not only could health be restored and debts repaid but, still more important, pressing literary obligations might swiftly be dispatched: *Un mangeur d’opium* needed urgently to be completed, a projected article on ‘les peintres qui subordonnent l’art au raisonnement, à la pensée’ (the never completed *L’Art philosophique*)<sup>8</sup> was still to be researched and drafted, and a further major critical undertaking involving his existing essays on Poe and a still to be composed study of the life and work of Théophile Gautier required immediate attention. In addition, there were, as Baudelaire wrote ruefully to his mother in February 1858, ‘ces maudites *Fleurs du mal* qu’il faut recommencer’, in other words the task of composing new pieces to repair the lacunae in the work’s ‘secret architecture’ brought about by the censor’s excisions in 1857, potentially a mechanical and in any case a burdensome undertaking for which, he was sure, repose and peace of mind were essential. For Baudelaire, the thought that he must ‘redevenir poète, artificiellement, par volonté, rentrer dans une ornière, qu’on croyait définitivement creusée’ was all the more oppressive in that he was evidently planning a major new departure in his literary career. ‘Je porte dans ma tête une vingtaine de romans et deux drames’, he told his mother, and it seems clear that it was as a dramatist and writer of short stories that, throughout 1858 and, indeed, much of 1859, Baudelaire saw himself conquering that artistic glory that the publication and subsequent condemnation of *Les Fleurs du mal* had so egregiously failed to secure.<sup>9</sup> ‘J’espère tout de cette nouvelle installation,’ he informed Madame Aupick in February 1858, ‘le repos, le travail et la santé.’<sup>10</sup> As the example of Flaubert at Croisset made clear – Baudelaire refers to it without naming names in another letter of that month – country life combined with maternal care made possible ‘un repos suffisant pour accomplir . . . une fort belle œuvre et devenir célèbre d’un seul coup’. His mother certainly possessed ‘l’esprit d’ordre qui crée la

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liberté' and he had, he said, every reason to believe that 'par le contact la contagion me prendra'.<sup>11</sup> Honfleur, in short, was for the broken, embittered but still hopeful Baudelaire of the late 1850s nothing less than a Promised Land – 'ce Chanaan', he would call it in December 1858<sup>12</sup> – in which, cocooned in a mother's solicitude and love, he might yet be remade, rejuvenated and, in a word, *reborn* from the wreckage of his Parisian existence.

Yet, maddeningly, just as the diminutive Zion at the mouth of the Seine seemed within his grasp, everything conspired to keep him in the Babylonian captivity of the metropolis. 1858 was one of the most frustrating years of Baudelaire's life as the departure he had planned first for mid-March, then for mid-June, seemed to be indefinitely postponed by financial and literary complications. 'Cette vie si calme à laquelle j'aspire de tout mon cœur' was in May as far away as ever;<sup>13</sup> 'il y a si longtemps', he wrote again in June, 'que je me figure que je vais habiter là-bas, – toujours la semaine prochaine!'<sup>14</sup> All through these difficult months, mother and son prepared for his installation. Baudelaire dispatched books, drawings, paintings, papers and other effects while Madame Aupick busied herself readying the room he was to occupy at the Maison-Joujou, even planning to install a ventilator to extract the smoke from his pipe: 'Laisse donc là ton idée fantastique de soupape', Baudelaire replied in amused exasperation, 'crains-tu donc que je saute, comme un bateau à vapeur?'<sup>15</sup> Towards the end of October 1858 Baudelaire made a flying visit to Honfleur and saw the Maison-Joujou for the first time. 'Je suis allé voir le local', he reported to Poulet-Malassis on his return to Paris, 'il est perché au-dessus de la mer, et le jardin lui-même est un petit décor. Tout cela est fait pour l'étonnement des yeux. C'est ce qu'il me faut.'<sup>16</sup> Already, it would seem, the prospect of tranquillity was quickening his creative urge and ambition, for around 5 November he announced to Poulet-Malassis that, instead of the six *fleurs* he had to write, he was beginning to think in terms of twenty.<sup>17</sup> On 10 November he informed Calonne, the owner–editor of *La Revue contemporaine*, that not only had he begun work on *L'Art philosophique* and that 'les nouvelles *Fleurs de mal* sont commencées' but that he was also working on a number of *poèmes nocturnes*, in other words the prose poems to which more and more he was turning in his efforts to express 'l'héroïsme de la vie moderne'.<sup>18</sup> At much the same time he left the Hôtel Voltaire and moved in temporarily with Jeanne Duval at 22 Rue Beautreillis in the working-class Faubourg Saint-Antoine with a view to leaving Paris

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for good in the immediate future. Once again his departure was delayed by financial and publishing obligations that compelled him to make two trips to Poulet-Malassis's home town of Alençon which, in all, kept him out of Paris for over a fortnight in the second half of December 1858 and the first few days of the new year. Already, though, the creative blockage from which he had suffered throughout most of 1858 was beginning to yield. On 1 January 1859, whilst still in Alençon, he sent Calonne the manuscript of the remarkable poem 'Danse macabre', describing it as 'le fruit de mes rêveries en chemin de fer', by which he can only mean his recent journeys to and from Alençon; he may also have enclosed the manuscript of 'Sisina', but he was at pains to stress that the present 'petit paquet de vers' was as nothing beside the 'très gros paquet (*un peu plus surprenant*) que je vous fabriquerai à Honfleur'.<sup>19</sup> Baudelaire was still in Paris on 10 January and appears finally to have left for Honfleur some time between the 15th and 20th of that month, almost a full year since the possibility of his doing so was first seriously mooted. By 1 February he was sufficiently settled in the Maison-Joujou to tell Poulet-Malassis that he was now 'absolument installé' and 'prêt à remplir tous mes devoirs; je veux dire: privé de prétexte pour y manquer'.<sup>20</sup> The most concentratedly creative period of his life had begun.

Baudelaire remained in Honfleur until the beginning of March when, in dire financial straits despite his mother's hospitality, he was obliged to go in person to Paris to collect money owed to him. Once more he stayed with Jeanne at the Rue Beautreillis, but his hopes of returning swiftly to Honfleur were shattered by the time-consuming complexity of the business he had to transact, by the alarming deterioration in Jeanne's health and possibly by health complications of his own. Almost completely impecunious, Baudelaire was obliged on 26 March to request a grant of 300 francs from the Société des Gens de Lettres on the grounds that 'un accident douloureux me retient à Paris et m'empêche de retourner chez moi'.<sup>21</sup> He received half the sum requested, and even this must have vanished when, on 5 April, it was necessary for Jeanne – by now almost completely paralysed – to be moved to a *maison de santé* in the Faubourg Saint-Denis, where, supported mainly by money sent by Baudelaire, she would remain until mid-May.<sup>22</sup> While in Paris Baudelaire made a single and apparently very brief visit to the annual Salon soon after it opened on 15 April at the Palais des Beaux-Arts;<sup>23</sup> he returned to Honfleur almost immediately afterwards and remained there without interruption until

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mid-June when, once again, financial and literary commitments required his presence in Paris. After a summer and autumn spent in the capital – extremely productively, as it happened, as though, despite every upheaval, the fecundating influence of Honfleur was still working from afar – Baudelaire made a further extremely brief visit to the port in mid-December, whereafter, but for a flying visit in October 1860 and a fraught overnight stay in July 1865, he was never to see it or the Maison-Joujou again. Yet as the real Honfleur became, despite its physical proximity, more and more unattainable, so the Honfleur of the mind strengthened its grip on Baudelaire's imagination, all the more so when, beginning in 1864, his perennial condition of spiritual outcast was exacerbated by his being, so to speak, doubly exiled – exiled not merely from Honfleur in Paris but from Paris in Brussels where everything, even its 'Styx-contrefaçon' of a river grotesquely named 'la Senne', seemed a sinister parody of the already parodic pseudo-Rome of Haussmann's Paris:<sup>24</sup> 'Je donnerais je ne sais quoi', Baudelaire wrote in February 1865, 'pour trinquer dans un cabaret du Havre ou de Honfleur avec un matelot, un forçat même, pourvu qu'il ne fût pas belge. Quant à revoir la maison si gaie où habite ma mère, mes livres et mes collections, c'est une joie à laquelle je n'ose pas rêver.'<sup>25</sup> In one of his very last letters written in Brussels and dated 5 March 1866, Baudelaire told his mother that 'mon installation à Honfleur a toujours été le plus cher de mes rêves'.<sup>26</sup> Let us take him at his word, though the suspicion remains that, as time went on, Baudelaire, without admitting so to himself, preferred the dream to its realization and, as F. W. Leakey has suggested, placed 'continual, almost gratuitous obstacles in the way of his so-long-desired establishment at Honfleur'.<sup>27</sup> Rendered unattainable, Honfleur became the elsewhere that underwrote his failings, the land of imagined milk and honey that enabled him to evade the intolerable truth that, as a creative writer, he was effectively a spent force by 1862 or 1863. To go to Honfleur would mean confronting that truth: not surprisingly, Baudelaire preferred to remain in exile.

'Ici, dans le repos, la faconde m'est revenue'<sup>28</sup>

In all, as we have seen, Baudelaire spent barely more than three months at Honfleur in 1859, an insignificant provincial interlude in an otherwise entirely metropolitan existence but for the fact that these three months away from Paris were, for this quintessentially 'Parisian' poet, by far the most intensive and prolific period in a

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literary career, which, to say the least, was not conspicuously marked by speed or fecundity of creation.<sup>29</sup> The catalogue of works completed or wholly composed between mid-January and mid-June 1859 is staggeringly impressive, the more so given the six hectic and in all likelihood barren weeks spent in Paris in March and April. As early as 2 or 3 February – barely a fortnight, in other words, after his arrival in Honfleur – Baudelaire sent a manuscript of ‘Le Voyage’ (along with ‘Sisina’ and ‘L’Albatros’) to Barbey d’Aurevilly in Paris. Not only is ‘Le Voyage’ the longest of Baudelaire’s poems but, as Barbey rhapsodized in his letter of acknowledgement, it is ‘d’un élan lyrique, d’une ouverture d’ailes d’*Albatros* que je ne vous connaissais pas, crapule de Génie!’<sup>30</sup> Everything Baudelaire says suggests that the poem, though just possibly conceived in Paris, was written entirely at Honfleur: a little matter, in other words, of 144 lines in a fortnight or less, with virtually no significant changes between the first published version (in a *placard* privately printed in Honfleur itself and published in mid-February)<sup>31</sup> and the definitive text in the 1861 edition of *Les Fleurs du mal*, and this from a poet who, but three weeks before completing this Herculean achievement, had described himself as ‘un cerveau qui n’accouche qu’avec le forceps’<sup>32</sup> and who derived a certain bitter pride from the fact that he did not possess ‘la souplesse d’un Banville’!<sup>33</sup> As for ‘L’Albatros’, which appeared alongside ‘Le Voyage’ in the *placard*, this is almost certainly a text of the early 1840s that the proximity of the sea and memories of his voyage of 1841–1842 prompted Baudelaire to retrieve from his unpublished manuscripts, inspired, perhaps, as Jean-Aubry suggested, by the mysterious correspondence between this unremarkable work of his youth and ‘la vue de ces mouettes que, journellement et depuis des lustres, les gamins sur la jetée de Honfleur offrent au passant pour quelques sous et qu’ils s’amuse souvent à laisser boitiller devant eux péniblement sur la grève leur ayant lié ou brisé une aile’.<sup>34</sup> Be that as it may, ‘L’Albatros’ almost certainly required some revision before it could be published and in that same first week of February Baudelaire must have worked with his usual manic attention to detail on the proofs of ‘Danse macabre’, returning them to Calonne on 11 February. As if this were not enough, on 13 February Baudelaire announced to Poulet-Malassis the completion of the promised article on Gautier,<sup>35</sup> which, he told Asselineau a week later, he had written ‘avec une rapidité de démon’, perhaps finishing it as early as the 6th.<sup>36</sup> ‘Tout cela a été écrit très ardemment et très vite’, he informed Gautier’s son on the



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27th, urgently requesting the return of the proofs of the article for correction;<sup>37</sup> and if we further recall that Baudelaire was *at the same time* working to complete *Un mangeur d'opium* and beginning to collect material that would later be incorporated into *Le Peintre de la vie moderne* which was also beginning to take shape in his mind,<sup>38</sup> then it is clear that the Maison-Joujou in February 1859 witnessed – and, it may be, actively provoked – an eruption of creative energy quite without parallel in Baudelaire's literary career. Nor did the poet's creativity abate after his return from Paris in mid-April. On 29 April he announced to Poulet-Malassis not only that *Un mangeur d'opium* was at last complete but that he would also dispatch 'ce soir ou demain' the manuscript of the *Salon de 1859*, perhaps his most closely argued and suggestive prose work, written in around ten days after the briefest of visits with the aid only of the *livret*.<sup>39</sup> And still the list of works continues. In the same letter of 29 April Baudelaire announced the completion of a group of 'nouvelles *Fleurs du mal*', and once again he stresses the rapidity, even the violence, with which he wrote them: 'A tout casser, comme une explosion de gaz chez un vitrier'.<sup>40</sup> Which poems were these? 'La Chevelure' (first published in the *Revue française* on 20 May) must be one of them, inspired beyond doubt by memories and longings detonated by the spectacle of Jeanne paralysed and helpless at the Rue Beautreillis, and the earliest versions of the much reworked 'Les Sept Vieillards' must also date from this period, again conceivably provoked by an actual experience on the streets of Paris in March or April. By now it was clear to Baudelaire that, with regard both to content and to style, he was breaking entirely new poetic ground. As early as 21 February, writing to Sainte-Beuve, he described the 'nouvelles fleurs' he had just completed – in other words, 'Le Voyage' and 'Danse macabre' – as 'passablement singulières',<sup>41</sup> and when, in late May or early June, he sent a manuscript of 'Les Sept Vieillards' to Jean Morel under the title of 'Fantômes parisiens', the radical novelty of the project is still more insistently dwelt upon: 'c'est le premier numéro d'une nouvelle série que je veux tenter, et je crains bien d'avoir simplement réussi à dépasser les limites assignées à la Poésie'.<sup>42</sup> The composition of 'Les Sept Vieillards' may well have been closely followed by that of its companion piece, 'Les Petites Vieilles'; both poems, Baudelaire said when sending autographs of them in September to their dedicatee and inspiration, Victor Hugo, 'se jouaient depuis longtemps dans mon cerveau',<sup>43</sup> and, since they clearly formed a single project in his mind, it is reasonable to assign



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the conception and early drafts, if not the definitive text, of 'Les Petites Vieilles' to the final weeks of the poet's Honfleur interlude. Finally, in addition to this already prodigious output, Baudelaire was also while in Honfleur planning and researching a study of Spanish painting; he worked fitfully on *L'Art philosophique*, made some progress on the scenario of a drama based on a short story by his friend Paul de Molènes (*Le Marquis du 1<sup>er</sup> houzards*) – it was, indeed, in order to advance this project that he was obliged finally to leave Honfleur in mid-June<sup>44</sup> – and on 13 June announced to Poulet-Malassis the completion of a *nouvelle* about the discovery of a political conspiracy;<sup>45</sup> in fact, no more than an outline appears to have been written,<sup>46</sup> though one that bears witness – if further proof were needed – to the formidable variety, complexity and intensity of Baudelaire's literary undertakings in the first half of 1859. What can have provoked this – to use the poet's own term<sup>47</sup> – sudden *explosion* of creative energy?

## 'Révoir' and 'rêve': Honfleur and the sea

At the core of Baudelaire's experience and writing is the relationship between *moi* and *non-moi* in all its endlessly conflictual permutations:<sup>48</sup> total estrangement of self and world, the *moi* absorbing or being absorbed by the *non-moi*, imposing its order on the outside world or, alternatively, collapsing under external pressures, splintering amongst the objects that surround or assail it. Yet sometimes, at moments so rare and precious that they will merit the name 'supernatural', the opposition or, at best, the tension between self and world is miraculously suspended and, for perhaps no more than an instant, conditions of exchange and harmony prevail so that whether 'toutes ces choses pensent par moi, ou je pense par elles' ('Le *Confiteor* de l'artiste') ceases to be of importance: all that matters is that 'dans certains états de l'âme presque surnaturels, la profondeur de la vie se révèle tout entière dans le spectacle, si ordinaire qu'il soit, qu'on a sous les yeux. Il en devient le symbole.'<sup>49</sup> 'Sacred' moments of this kind are, by definition, fleeting and sooner or later – probably sooner if the experience of 'Le *Confiteor*' is any guide – the duality of subject and object is restored. Nonetheless, it is possible to envisage circumstances in which such moments of tangence between self and world might be multiplied and even controlled, in which, more generally, the structure of the outside world might *correspond* to an exceptionally high degree or in an exceptionally suggestive manner to the

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structure and needs of the mind so that the possibilities of creative exchange and reciprocity would be enormously enhanced. It is this quintessentially Baudelairean notion of *correspondance* between inner and outer worlds which, I feel, explains in some large measure the sudden re-awakening of his sources of poetic creativity in 1859 and the spectacular results that flowed from it. The joy that Baudelaire appears immediately to have felt when first visiting the port in October 1858 was, it seems clear, occasioned less by an encounter with 'le nouveau' than by recognition of one of his most deep-rooted ideals now miraculously realized before him: in its every detail, Honfleur concretized that 'vrai pays de Cocagne' to which, under the guise of 'inviting' Marie Daubrun, he had imaginatively transported himself in the two versions of 'L'Invitation au voyage' published in June 1855 (the verse text) and August 1857 (its prose doublet). Here, if anywhere, was a 'pays singulier, supérieur aux autres, comme l'Art l'est à la Nature, où celle-ci est réformée par le rêve, où elle est corrigée, embellie, refondue'. Protected landward by the steeply wooded Côte de Grâce and so effectively shielded from the sea by walls and groynes that even in the squalliest winter weather its central *bassin* remains entirely still, old Honfleur even now strikes the visitor as an embodiment of the Baudelairean ideal of enclosed concentration<sup>50</sup> 'où tout est beau, riche, tranquille, honnête; où le luxe a plaisir de se mirer dans l'ordre; où la vie est grasse et douce à respirer; d'où le désordre, la turbulence et l'imprévu sont exclus' ('L'Invitation au voyage') and in which, it is worth adding, virtually no evidence of 'le végétal irrégulier' ('Rêve parisien') is to be detected, as though the port's chief *raison d'être* were to satisfy that biophobic rage for order to which its most famous resident more than once gave voice.<sup>51</sup>

Secure, stable and reposeful behind its protective wall, the tiny port opened up to a marine prospect uniquely suited to Baudelaire's taste and needs in that, an 'infini diminutif', it miraculously united the limitless and the limited: 'six ou sept lieues représentent pour l'homme le rayon de l'infini', he wrote in a note to *Mon cœur mis à nu*, 'douze ou quatorze lieues . . . de liquide en mouvement suffisent pour donner la plus haute idée de beauté qui soit offerte à l'homme sur son habitacle transitoire'.<sup>52</sup> Vastly impressive even now, the Seine estuary would have been still more so in the late 1850s before the construction of the Digue de Ratier and the reclamation of large tracts of land on both sides of the river, yet the northern shoreline, clearly visible from Honfleur (to which it was linked by a ferry taken by Baudelaire on a number of