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BAUDELAIRE IN 1859

A STUDY IN THE SOURCES OF POETIC CREATIVITY

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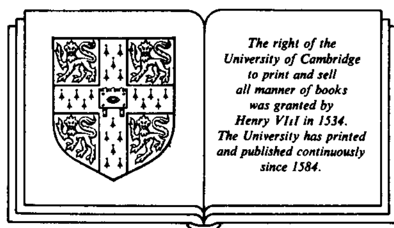
RICHARD D. E. BURTON

UNIVERSITY OF SUSSEX



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NEW YORK NEW ROCHELLE MELBOURNE SYDNEY

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi

Cambridge University Press
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521114141

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First published 1988
This digitally printed version 2009

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data
Burton, Richard D. E., 1946–
Baudelaire in 1859: a study in the sources of poetic creativity /
Richard D. E. Burton.
p. cm. – (Cambridge studies in French)
Bibliography.
Includes index.
ISBN 0 521 34577 4
1. Baudelaire, Charles, 1821–1867 – Criticism and interpretation.
2. Creation (Literary, artistic, etc.)
I. Title. II. Series.
PQ2191.Z5B79 1988
841′.8 – dc19 87-31152 CIP

ISBN 978-0-521-34577-4 hardback
ISBN 978-0-521-11414-1 paperback

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PREFACE

The present study is unusual in that it concentrates on texts composed or completed in just one twelve-month period – January to December 1859 – of Baudelaire's life, and it may be that I can best explain what I am trying to do by indicating how the whole undertaking gradually formed itself in my mind. In 1980 I published a brief essay in which, taking 'Le Cygne' as my starting point, I attempted to trace a multiplicity of thematic links between that poem and other texts drawn from different periods of Baudelaire's life and postulated the existence of some common matrix or magma of themes, images and obsessions from which a considerable number of – at first sight – wholly unrelated texts could be said to have issued.[1] I was aware at the time that many of the most important texts I was studying were, like my key text 'Le Cygne', written in 1859 and that there existed a whole series of 'correspondences' not only between some of the major poetic works of that year – in particular, between 'Le Cygne', 'Les Sept Vieillards', 'Les Petites Vielles' and 'Le Masque' – but also between them and various non-poetic works published the same year, notably the *Salon de 1859*. As I continued to read and reread Baudelaire, the year 1859 assumed an increasingly central position in my view of his development and achievement as a writer. I made a list of all the texts – poems, plays, short stories, criticism – on which Baudelaire worked during 1859, and was struck by the exceptional quantity and quality of his output that year. 1859 was the year in which Baudelaire wrote what are, by any estimation, five of his greatest poems: in chronological order, 'Le Voyage', 'La Chevelure', 'Les Sept Vieillards', 'Les Petites Vieilles' and 'Le Cygne', lengthy and complex works all of them, as well as a number of other major poems, notably 'A une Madone' and 'Le Masque'. In addition to composing this impressive group of poetic texts, Baudelaire completed his translation and analysis of De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium Eater*, wrote the great essay on Théophile

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Gautier and the no less important *Salon de 1859* and drafted some of the literary portraits that were to appear in Eugène Crépet's anthology *Les Poètes français* in 1862; he also devoted much time to the never-completed drama, *Le Marquis du Ier houzards*, and to a number of short stories which again do not seem to have got beyond the stage of preliminary drafts. For any writer, it would have been a remarkably productive year; by the standards of Baudelaire's previous and subsequent output, it was without parallel.

In common, perhaps, with many readers of *Les Fleurs du mal*, I had come to accept Baudelaire's own self-image – amply reinforced by the writings of Sartre in particular – as a 'paresseux nerveux'[2] who wrote only with the utmost difficulty and slowness, whose every line was purchased at the price of immense pain and labour and whose whole personal and literary life was characterized by a deep-rooted and pervasive *sterility*. Here, on the other hand, was evidence of a remarkable *fecundity*, a speed, perhaps even an ease, of production during at least one year of the poet's life. I was increasingly struck by the frequency with which, precisely, Baudelaire used the words 'fécond', 'fertile' and their cognates in 1859 – the reader will find examples enough in the pages that follow – as though he himself were conscious of some unwonted creative energy at work within him. I also noted other words, images and phrases recurring with the regularity of *Leitmotiven* – 'rajeunissement', 'explosion', 'charité', 'larmes', 'enfantement' amongst others – suggesting not only that all of Baudelaire's writings of 1859 were drawing on a single reservoir of images and themes but also that the poet was in touch with sources of creativity which had been closed to him during the relatively unproductive period – in terms of *poetic* output – that seems to have followed upon the collapse of the Second Republic and the failure of his relationship with Madame Sabatier and which the manifold difficulties of 1857–1858 had brought to some kind of negative culmination. Remarkably, Baudelaire published *only one poem* in 1858 ('Duellum') and, though he composed a number of others ('Le Possédé', 'Le Goût du néant' and, at the year's end, 'Sisina' and 'Danse macabre'), there is an unmistakable impression that year of a talent close to exhaustion and, in the absence of fresh poetic resources, diverting and dissipating itself in the comparatively mechanical tasks of translation and art criticism.

The first chapter of this book, 'Baudelaire at Honfleur', attempts to reconstruct and analyse the various subjective and objective conditions that contributed to the extraordinary *explosion* –

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Baudelaire's own word – of creativity that he clearly experienced between January and July 1859.

The chapters that follow deal with the major *poetic* texts of 1859 approximately in their order of composition; my intention is both to analyse them in their own right and also to indicate the place they occupy in the year-long trajectory of Baudelaire's imagination. The study as a whole is intended to show, first, that the year 1859 is indeed crucial to Baudelaire's whole achievement as a poet, and then, perhaps more controversially, that it is principally the poems written during that year which make *Les Fleurs du mal* the masterpiece of nineteenth-century French poetry that it is. To any admirer of Baudelaire who has not done so, I would recommend the experiment of reading simply the poems of the 1857 edition of *Les Fleurs du mal* in the order in which they originally appeared. It is a strange and somewhat dispiriting experience, for though the 1857 edition certainly contains some wonderful poems ('Le Balcon', 'Harmonie du soir', 'Le Flacon', the 'Spleen' poems, 'Un voyage à Cythère') and though the lineaments of that *architecture secrète* of which Barbey d'Aurevilly spoke in his famous review in *Le Pays* are certainly present,[3] the collection as a whole manifestly lacks consistency of substance and, still more, overall direction and impact. There is no 'Chevelure' to lend its sumptuous weight to the Jeanne Duval poems, no 'Tableaux parisiens' to sustain and redirect the central portions of the collection and, above all, no 'Voyage' to confer a retrospective unity of theme and structure to the preceding hundred poems: after its explosive opening, the 1857 *Fleurs du mal* gradually succumbs to the dubious squibs and flashes of self-conscious erotic daringness ('Fleurs du mal') and hackneyed Satanism ('Révolte') before petering out in the three 'Mort' poems. *As a whole*, the 1857 edition seems to belong more and to owe more to the thematic and stylistic world of Gautier, Pétrus Borel and assorted *petits romantiques*; as Eliot wrote, while failing, like so many readers, to distinguish between the two editions published in Baudelaire's lifetime, its 'prostitutes, mulattoes, Jewesses, serpents, cats, corpses form a machinery which has not worn well'.[4] One of my principal aims here is to stress that the 'real' *Fleurs du mal* is the *Fleurs du mal* of 1861 and that it is the poems of 1859 – poems that were written under the aegis of Hugo rather than of Gautier – that created that 'frisson nouveau' of which Hugo himself spoke, referring not, as is widely but mistakenly supposed, to the 1857 edition but to that quintessentially '1859' work, 'Les Sept Vieillards'.[5]

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Preface

In writing this book I have benefited considerably from the advice, encouragement and interest of Dr J. A. Hiddleston of Exeter College, Oxford and Brian Nicholas of Sussex University; each has subjected parts of the study to searching detailed criticism, most, but not all, of which I have tried to incorporate into my successive revisions. The comments and criticisms of the series editor, Malcolm Bowie, have been of particular value to me, restraining some, at least, of the excesses of thought and expression to which I am prone. In Margaret Ralph I found quite simply the ideal typist. My principal debt, though, is to someone whom, as I write this preface, I have never actually met: Professor Ross Chambers of the University of Michigan, but for whose encouragement, enthusiasm and practical help, all coming at, for me, critical stages, the present study would probably not have been embarked upon, let alone brought to a conclusion. Since I am presenting here a more than usually personal view of Baudelaire's life and work, the usual absolution of others from responsibility for what I have said is more than usually necessary.

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