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978-0-521-36937-4 - Baudelaire Les Fleurs du Mal

F. W. Leakey

Excerpt

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## *Chapter 1*

# Composition

### **The poet in a bourgeois era**

The first French Revolution of 1789 saw the emergence of the middle classes as a political and economic force, in opposition to the aristocracy; but the consolidation of that power, after a succession of régimes (the First Republic: Convention, Directory, Consulate; Napoleon's First Empire; the restored Bourbon monarchy in 1814), came only in 1830, with the coronation of Louis-Philippe after a second Revolution. That 'bourgeois monarchy' lasted only until 1848, but the new organisation of society survived in broad terms a Second Republic (1848–52), a Second Empire under Louis-Napoleon (1852–70), a Third Republic lasting into our own century.

The coming of a bourgeois era posed new problems for the artist in general and the poet in particular. Romanticism, as an aesthetic movement, postulated the intellectual and spiritual primacy of the creative artist; no such primacy or economic security, however, was accorded him within the bourgeois scheme, and moreover he often offended against conventional moral standards. Within Romantic mythology, and that of subsequent aesthetic movements, too, the bourgeois thus became an enemy and the poet a beleaguered victim, sadly, 'unacknowledged' as (in Shelley's terms) the 'legislator of the world' his unique gifts qualified him to be.

This highly generalised picture obviously needs correction in respect of individual cases. Lamartine, for instance, did attain political authority in 1848, as effective Head for a few months of the Provisional Government of the Second Republic; Hugo drew substantial financial rewards from all

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his writings, including his poems, and gained enormous prestige and popularity in exile under the Second Empire and thereafter under the Third Republic; Baudelaire himself, though for most of his life violently opposed to conventional morality, attempted briefly and opportunistically to come to terms with his bourgeois public in 1845–6 (see my *Baudelaire*, pp. 183–90, ‘The wooing of the bourgeois’). The nineteenth century nevertheless certainly had its poet-victims; Baudelaire in particular, in the light of the *Fleurs du Mal* trial of 1857, becomes a special case, suffering active persecution at the hands of a hypocritical bourgeois establishment, and in that context inviting analogy with the admired poet-martyrs of previous centuries – with the sixteenth-century Tasso of Delacroix’s paintings, the eighteenth-century Chatterton of Vigny’s Romantic drama of that name.

**A young man’s book**

The first thing to understand about *Les Fleurs du Mal*, is that it is essentially a young man’s book; though published when Baudelaire was in his mid-thirties, in 1857, the poems it contained had in fact largely been written, at least in first draft, when he was still in his early twenties, during the period 1841–6 when, against his family’s wishes, he had embarked upon his literary career. An initial study of the book’s composition – a word we need to take here in both its senses: ‘content’ as well as ‘genesis’ – will serve not only to explain the seemingly interminable delays which impeded publication of the book, but also to clarify Baudelaire’s intentions when he was finally able to present it to his readers, in a very different arrangement from the one originally envisaged.

A first chance for Baudelaire to publish perhaps as many as forty of his poems, came to him in the early months of 1843, when, with his friends Le Vavas seur, Prarond and Dozon, he prepared to bring out a collective volume under the studiously neutral title *Vers*. At the last minute, however, he withdrew from this project – no doubt partly because of his sensitiveness to certain criticisms made of the poems he sub-

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mitted, but perhaps also because of his own dissatisfaction with these poems, as reflected in a uniquely searching document of youthful self-criticism, the novella *La Fanfarlo* (composed 1843–6, published at the beginning of 1847).

*Les Lesbiennes* (1845–7)

In 1845, the year of Baudelaire's first published work under his own name, the *Salon de 1845*, came the promise of a collection of poems entirely by him, to be called *Les Lesbiennes*. From this 'firecracker' title – altogether more challenging than the anodyne *Vers*; for the description 'titre pétard', see *CP* I, p. 378 – it seems certain that Baudelaire's book would have included in an eponymous first section, probably designed originally as a verse novel, the three Lesbian poems which eventually figure in the *Fleurs du Mal* of 1857; other poems in other sections would no doubt have been added to fill out the 'large-quarto' volume, but it is impossible without further evidence to say exactly which these might have been – the more so since Baudelaire, to judge by the oblique comments made on his earlier poems in *La Fanfarlo*, seems at that date to have been dissatisfied with many of these.

*Les Limbes* (1848–52)

The *Lesbiennes* project never of course materialised – mainly no doubt because of Baudelaire's desperate personal circumstances (moral as well as material) during the year 1847. From that low-water mark he was rescued by the Revolution of February 1848, which for a while swept him, like so many writers and artists of the time, into the politically active ranks of the Republicans and Socialists. Even more important for us, it led him to devise, under the title *Les Limbes*, an entirely new and ideologically acceptable framework for the publication of *all* the poems he had thus far composed and felt able to avow – rather than some only of these, as in the case of *Les Lesbiennes*. There could of course be no question, in this new phase of political and journalistic activity into which he

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had thrown himself, of his settling down afresh to compose a further collection of suitably socialist and humanitarian poems; his inspired solution, therefore, since these earlier verses constituted his sole available poetic capital, was to present them as it were objectively; rather than as an expression of his own personal ideas, these earlier verses could be seen as a sort of collective chronicle of the troubled feelings of a whole youthful generation. But the new title (now 'mysterious' rather than of 'firecracker' type; see again *CPI* I, p. 378) clearly also has its significance: modern youth, for Baudelaire, seems caught as if in a time-warp, in an uncertain transitional zone between the old world and the new, reminiscent of that theological *limbo* in which souls after death await their final redemption.

The complete manuscript of *Les Limbes*, as shown by Baudelaire to Asselineau in October or November 1851, has unfortunately disappeared; what have survived, however, are the texts of some twenty-seven poems extracted from that manuscript – which we know moreover, again from Asselineau, to have included all the poems which were to figure in *Les Fleurs du Mal* some six years later, together with a number of additional pieces which Baudelaire decided to 'sacrifice' (his words) at that date. From the titles and subjects of the last two sections of the 1857 *Fleurs du Mal*: 'Le Vin' and 'La Mort', we may gather that these sections will already have figured as such in *Les Limbes*; so perhaps also did the first and third sections of the 1857 edition: 'Spleen et Idéal' and 'Révolte'.

*Les Fleurs du Mal* (1857)

Although, in 1852, Baudelaire's *Limbes* project may have seemed so near to realisation, several factors conspired at that time to prevent him from carrying it through. Political, first of all: after the *coup d'état* of December 1851, his scheme will no longer have seemed to him, let alone to others, to provide an acceptable framework for his verses – even though later developments (those of 1855–7) were to show that these same

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poems could well be presented in a quite different and unpolitical light. Circumstantial, next: by ill-chance, another verse collection, bearing the same title, had come out (however obscurely, in Poitiers) in May 1852. Above all, creative: in that same year, his growing enthusiasm for Edgar Allan Poe determined him on a new career as the accredited translator of the American writer's works – the presenter to the French public of this great but too little-known foreign genius. This decisive commitment to Poe – which incidentally, was to bring him his greatest and most secure contemporary fame, and the sole substantial financial rewards for his writings he was ever to enjoy – did not, even in 1852, cause him to abandon entirely his efforts to place his own poems, nor his hope that in collected form they might eventually find a publisher. But for really serious progress to be made in this direction, Baudelaire had to await an important event which occurred towards the end of 1854: the inspired suggestion made at that time by Hippolyte Babou that his friend's book should henceforth bear the title 'Les Fleurs du Mal'. Almost immediately after this, Baudelaire entered into protracted negotiations with the *Revue des Deux Mondes*, as a result of which that highly respectable and influential journal agreed to publish on 1 June 1855, under the new-found title, a full eighteen of his poems – selected, of course, from the two albums previously destined for *Les Limbes*.

This publication in the *Revue des Deux Mondes* was highly important for Baudelaire – not only because it for the first time brought a considerable amount of his poetry before a wider public, but above all because the selection included so many texts of the very highest quality. Of further interest also is the principle Baudelaire sought to adopt (*CPI* I, p. 312) in the arrangement of these poems – that of *sequence*, with one poem leading smoothly into the next; this principle is one that he was able eventually to follow in his own distribution of his poems in the complete editions of 1857 and 1861.

At the end of 1856, Baudelaire at last found, in his providential friend Poulet-Malassis, a sympathetic publisher for the book under its new title; a contract between the two was

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signed at the end of 1856, and at the beginning of the following February the poet set to work once again on the manuscript previously prepared for *Les Limbes* – pruning the poems down to an exact 100 (or rather 101, if the prefatory *Au Lecteur*, ‘To the Reader’, is counted), by ‘sacrificing’ a number which had figured previously in the *Limbes* manuscript; rearranging the chosen poems in accordance with the new title and revised scheme that this entailed; aiming assiduously at that uniform excellence and maximum ‘conspicuousness’ he had already proclaimed (*CPI* I, p. 364) as the chief objective to be aimed at; above all, meticulously revising each text through endless galley-proofs and page-proofs, to the exasperation of his long-suffering publisher if (more or less!) to his own ultimate satisfaction. For understandable reasons, of course, as no doubt already previously in his *Limbes* manuscript, Baudelaire was careful to withhold all details as to the far distant dates of original composition of his poems; not for him the precise – or ostensibly precise – chronology provided by Victor Hugo, say, in his regular verse-collections of the same whole period.

In the volume as finally published by Poulet-Malassis on 21 June 1857, Baudelaire’s 100 poems, following the verse preface *Au Lecteur*, are grouped into five main sections: ‘Spleen et Idéal’; ‘Fleurs du Mal’, ‘Révolte’; ‘Le Vin’; ‘La Mort’. The first, third, fourth and fifth of these sections will no doubt have been largely identical, as I have suggested, with those figuring previously in *Les Limbes*; there is now, however, one highly important difference of *presentation* that Baudelaire was to clarify (or confess), some nine years later, in a crucial and movingly candid letter to his legal guardian Ancelle:

Must I then spell out to you, who have no more guessed it than has anyone else, that into this *terrible* book I have poured my whole *heart*, my whole *tenderness*, my whole *religion* (however travestied), my whole *hatred*? It’s true that I may assert the contrary, that I may swear before high Heaven that the book is one of *pure art*, of *buffoonery*, of  *jugglery* – and I shall be lying, lying in my teeth.

(*CPI* II, p. 610)

This subjective content, if not particularly brought out in the

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*Fleurs du Mal* of 1857, no longer needed to be concealed entirely from view – as will previously have been the case in those heady days of 1848–51 when Baudelaire had felt obliged (or had attempted) to reconcile his verses with the Republican/Socialist ideology and intermittently utilitarian aesthetic he then professed.

The arrangement Baudelaire devised for his poems in 1857 needs to be studied in some detail, since we know him to have attached great importance to this – retrospective though it may have been. The first of the five main sections is disproportionately massive, including as it does nearly four-fifths of all the poems within the book; under the conveniently vague title ‘Spleen et Idéal’, we have in effect a sort of *omnium gatherum*, into which Baudelaire collected all the poems that eluded classification into the other four more distinct categories. (The order of words in the title, was clearly dictated by euphony rather than literal accuracy – which would have demanded, rather, ‘Idéal et Spleen’.) Baudelaire does, of course, make certain further groupings *within* the first section of his book: thus a first sub-division (poems I–XI, in the 1857 numbering; see *OCP* I, pp. 822–5) concerns the creative artist – his place in society, his aspirations, his struggles, his achievements. In three only of these poems, nos. I, IV and VI, is the theme general rather than personal; in all the others Baudelaire speaks in his own name, and this preponderance of the subjective over the objective is maintained in the succeeding texts – to become entire, of course, in the thirty-six love poems (XX–LV) which form the largest group in this section and indeed in the whole book. These love poems – preceded by three sonnets, nos. XVII–XIX, proclaiming less purely erotic ideals of feminine or feminised beauty – are interestingly grouped by Baudelaire according to three main favoured ‘types’, associated (though not exclusively) with particular women he had loved: a coloured girl, of exotic origins and predatory disposition (Jeanne Duval); a more mature woman, admired not always platonically for her moral influence as well as for her joyous radiance (Mme Sabatier); a buxom, childlike creature, finally,

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of sometimes ambivalent temperament, from whom also emotional as well as physical consolation is sought (Marie Daubrun). As to why exactly Baudelaire should have chosen to group his poems in this manner, I would suggest that he was here consciously emulating the admired Ronsard, who three centuries earlier had himself produced three magnificent books of separately dedicated love lyrics: the *Amours de Cassandre*, the *Second Livre des Amours*, the *Sonnets pour Hélène*. In the 1857 *Fleurs du Mal*, Baudelaire's own set of miniature *canzoniere* is almost immediately followed by seven poems (LVIII–LXIV) which correspond to the first element in the sectional title ('Spleen et Idéal'), with four in particular (LIX–LXII) being specifically entitled *Spleen*. (For Baudelaire's personal interpretation of this term borrowed from the English, see p. 23, below.) As for the final, more miscellaneous, group of poems which closes the whole 'Spleen et Idéal' section, this includes a series of six, nos. LXV–LXX, which all share an urban or near-urban setting foreshadowing the 'Tableaux parisiens' group to be added in the *Fleurs du Mal* of 1861.

The second section, unlike the other four, cannot possibly have figured as such in the *Limbes* manuscript of 1849–52, since its eponymous title, 'Fleurs du Mal', clearly derives from the definitive naming of Baudelaire's book at the end of 1854. This does not mean, far from it, that the poems forming this section were all newly composed; on the contrary, nine of these twelve texts are specifically known to have existed before 1845, and the other three (nos. LXXXVI–LXXXVII and LXXXIX), dating no doubt from the same period, will equally have been quarried from the 'Spleen et Idéal' or 'Révolte' sections of *Les Limbes*. The theme which unites these previously disparate but now linked poems, is not so much evil in general as, more particularly, sexual rebellion, enslavement and humiliation, his own and that of others. The next section dramatises a 'Révolte' which is explicitly religious, not to say blasphemous: St Peter is judged to have been entirely *right* to have denied Jesus, Cain is firmly preferred to Abel, Satan to God. The last two sections



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of the book, concerning Wine and Death respectively, are those in which the scheme devised for *Les Limbes* most obviously persists. In each of these two sections Baudelaire offers a mainly consoling poetic voice to various named social groups; in the final section of all, significantly, Death appears in that wholly 'friendly' guise (*Der Tod als Freund*) in which he is represented in an engraving by a contemporary German artist much admired by Baudelaire, Alfred Rethel.

So much for Baudelaire's grouping or overt classification of his poems – but there is also the principle (invoked already in connection with the *Revue des Deux Mondes* selection of 1855) of sequential continuity from one poem to another. A close examination of the 1857 edition, would show how extensively as well as ingeniously Baudelaire here contrived sequences of this kind. Here are four at least of the most striking such transitions: from the prefatory *Au Lecteur* to *Bénédiction* (the preponderant place of *ennui* in the world); from *Élévation* to *Correspondances* (the poet's, and Man's, apprehension of the language of Nature); from one animal species admired by the sage, to another – from *Les Chats* (favoured equally by lovers and scholars) to the owls of *Les Hiboux* (those models of unperturbed repose); from one lovers' paradise on earth, in *Le Vin des amants* ('The Lovers' Wine'), to another in Heaven, in *La Mort des amants* ('Death of the Lovers').

Baudelaire was well aware, in preparing his book for publication, that he risked prosecution on two grounds – for blasphemy and for 'offences against public morality'; these same charges were indeed being levelled at that very moment against Flaubert for his *Madame Bovary*. Of the various precautionary measures Baudelaire adopted to ward off these threats, one at least was to prove effective: this was the elaborate and avowedly 'detestable' note (*OCP I*, pp. 1075–6) prefixed to the 'Révolte' section, in which he explains that he is only affecting to espouse anti-religious opinions – those of 'ignorant' and 'angry' rebels – which of course he is far from sharing . . . Of the other three expedients he adopted, the first two had figured already in the *Revue des Deux Mondes*

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selection of 1855: a six-line epigraph taken from D'Aubigné's sixteenth-century epic poem, *Les Tragiques*, carrying the message that vice needed to be brought out into the open, rather than hidden away; a prefatory poem, *Au Lecteur*, which in effect implicated the reader in its catalogue of *universal* sin, and even, in its final line ('Hypocrite lecteur, – mon semblable, – mon frère!'), offered a sardonic anticipation of Hugo's classic defence of Romantic subjectivism, to *his* reader, in the prose preface of his *Contemplations* of 1856: 'How can you fail to understand that when I speak to you of myself, it is of *you* that I am speaking?' Baudelaire's third strategic precaution was adopted only at the very last moment: his addition, to the first of the two *Femmes damnées* poems ('Women damned'), of five thunderous concluding stanzas which transformed Delphine and Hippolyte into 'lamentable victims' inescapably bound for eternal damnation. But this last piecemeal measure proved to be no more than cosmetic: at the trial of 20 August 1857, the six poems ordered to be excised from any future edition of the book, as being likely to 'excite the senses' of its readers and to offend their sense of decency, included precisely the recently moralised *Femmes damnées* text – the other five being *Les Bijoux* ('The Jewels'), *Le Léthé*, *A celle qui est trop gaie*, *Lesbos* and *Les Métamorphoses du vampire* ('Transformations of a Vampire'). What seems curiously to have decided Baudelaire's fate as far as the six 'pièces condamnées' were concerned – and this is surely a significant indication of the 'moral standards' operative under the Second Empire – was that in these particular poems he had dared to describe in words what for centuries had been openly displayed in paintings: the female nude.

In the light of the book's previous history, it is interesting to examine the defence offered for it at the trial. Obviously Baudelaire felt obliged to make the case he felt most likely to be accepted by the Court; what he now claimed, therefore, was that from the book *taken as a whole* there emerged a 'terrible morality'; more specifically, he argued that the blasphemous or obscene poems needed to be set against