

**Paul Valéry, "The Position of Baudelaire" (1924).
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Baudelaire is at the height of his glory.

The little volume, *Les Fleurs du mal*, which contains less than three hundred pages, outweighs, in the esteem of the literary, the most illustrious and bulkiest works. It has been translated into most European languages: this is a fact on which I shall dwell a moment, for it is, I believe, without precedent in the history of French letters.

French poets are generally little known and appreciated abroad. We are more readily accorded leadership in prose; but poetic mastery is but reluctantly conceded to us. The order and rigor which have reigned over our language since the seventeenth century, our particular accentuation, our strict prosody, our taste for simplification and direct clarity, our fear of overstatement and absurdity, a sort of modesty in our expression and the abstract tendency of our thought have resulted in a poetry which differs considerably from that of other nations and which generally makes it inaccessible to them. La Fontaine seems insipid to foreigners. Racine is a closed book. His harmonies are too subtle, his design too pure, his language too elegant, too full of delicate light and shade, not to seem lifeless to those who have not an intimate knowledge of our tongue. Victor Hugo himself is scarcely known outside of France except by his novels.

But with Baudelaire, French poetry at length passes beyond our frontiers. It is read throughout the world; it takes its place as the characteristic poetry of modernity; it encourages imitation, it enriches countless minds. Men like Swinburne, Gabriele d'Annunzio, and Stefan George bear magnificent witness to the Baudelairean influence in foreign countries.

Thus I can say that, though there may be French poets greater and more powerfully endowed than Baudelaire, there is none more *important*.

Whence comes this extraordinary importance? How has a man so peculiar, so far removed from the average as Baudelaire, been able to engender so widespread a movement?

This great posthumous favor, this spiritual richness, this supreme glory, must depend not only on his own value as a poet but also upon exceptional circumstances. Critical intelligence associated with poetic proficiency is such a circumstance. Baudelaire owes to this rare alliance a capital discovery. He was born sensual and exacting; he had a sensibility whose exigencies led him to make the most delicate formal experiments; but these gifts would doubtless have made him merely a rival to Gautier or an excellent Parisian artist, had his mental curiosity not led him to the discovery of a new intellectual world in the works of Edgar Allan Poe. A demon of lucidity, a genius of analysis and an inventor of the newest, most seductive combinations of logic and imagination, of mysticism and calculation, a psychologist of the exceptional, a literary engineer who studied and utilized all the resources of art — thus Poe appeared to him, and filled him with admiration. So many original views and extraordinary promises enthralled him; his talent was transformed by them, his destiny magnificently changed.

I shall return shortly to the effects of this magic contact of two minds. But now I must consider a second remarkable circumstance of the molding of Baudelaire.

He arrived at man's estate when romanticism was at its height; a dazzling generation was in possession of the Empire of Letters. Lamartine, Hugo, Musset, Vigny were masters of the day.

Place yourself in the situation of a young man who came to the writing age in 1840. He has been brought up on the authors whom his instinct imperiously orders him to wipe out. His literary existence provoked and nourished by them, thrilled by their fame, determined by their works, is, however, necessarily dependent upon negation, upon the overthrow and replacement of those men who seemed to him to fill all fame's niches and to deny him: one, the world of forms; another, that of sentiments; a third, the picturesque; a fourth, profundity.

The point was to distinguish himself at any cost from a group of great poets whom some stroke of chance had exceptionally assembled in full vigor in the same period.

Baudelaire's problem then might, and probably should, be thus stated: "To be a great poet but to be neither Lamartine nor Hugo nor Musset." I do not say that these words were consciously uttered, but the thought must have existed in Baudelaire. It was even essentially Baudelaire. It was his *raison d'état*. In the domains of creation, which are also the domains of pride, the need to distinguish oneself cannot be separated from existence itself. Baudelaire wrote in the outline of his preface for the *Fleurs du mal*: "Illustrious poets have

long divided the richest provinces of the poetical domain among themselves — Consequently, I shall do something else — "

In short, he is led, constrained, by the state of his soul and its environment, more and more clearly to oppose the system, or the absence of system, called romanticism.

I shall not define this term. To attempt to do so it would be necessary to have lost all sense of strictness. My present task is merely to reconstitute the most probable reactions and intuitions of our poet "at the state of birth," when confronted with the literature of his age. From it, Baudelaire received a certain impression which we may reconstitute without much trouble. Indeed, thanks to the sequence of time and to later literary developments — thanks even to Baudelaire, to his work and its success — we possess a sure and simple means of introducing a little precision into our necessarily vague idea, sometimes accepted, sometimes wholly arbitrary, of romanticism. *This method consists in the observation of what followed romanticism, of what altered, corrected and contradicted it, and finally took its place.* It suffices to consider the movements and the works which were produced after and against it and which were inevitably, automatically, exact responses to what it was. Romanticism thus regarded was, then, what naturalism countered and what Parnassus assembled its forces against; it was what determined Baudelaire's particular attitude. It was what roused almost simultaneously against itself the will to perfection — the mysticism of "art for art's sake" — the demand for observation and an impersonal recording of things; the desire, in a word, *for a more solid substance and for a subtler, purer form.* Nothing throws more light on the Romantics than the ensemble of the programs and tendencies of their successors.

Can it be that the vices of romanticism are only the excesses inseparable from self-confidence? — The adolescence of new things is always somewhat pretentious. Wisdom, calculation, and, in a word, perfection appear only when strength comes to be economized.

However this may be, the period of scruples began with Baudelaire's youth. Gautier had already protested and reacted against the slackness in formal conditions and the indigence or imprecision of the language. Soon, each in his own way, Sainte-Beuve, Flaubert and Leconte de Lisle were to take arms against impassioned facility, stylistic inconsistency, and the excesses of silliness and eccentricity — Parnassians and realists consented to lose in apparent intensity, in abundance, in oratorical dynamism, what they gained in depth, in truth, in technical and intellectual quality.

To sum up, I will say that the replacing of romanticism by these diverse "schools" may be regarded as the substitution of reflective for spontaneous action.

The romantic output, in general, ill supports a slow and unsympathetic reading by a difficult and refined reader.

Baudelaire was such a reader. Baudelaire had the greatest interest — a vital interest — in picking out, in calling attention to, in exaggerating all the weaknesses and lapses of romanticism observed at close quarters in the work and personalities of its greatest men. *Romanticism is at its apogee*, he might say; *consequently it is mortal*, and he was able to consider the gods and demigods of the day, much as the suspicious eyes of Talleyrand and Metternich, about 1807, regarded the world's master —

Thus Baudelaire regarded Victor Hugo, and it is not impossible to conjecture what he thought of him. Hugo reigned; he had acquired over Lamartine the advantage of infinitely more powerful and more precise *working materials*. The vast range of his diction, the diversity of his rhythms, the superabundance of his images, crushed all rival poetry. But his work sometimes made concessions to the vulgar, lost itself in prophetic eloquence and infinite apostrophes. He flirted with the crowd, he indulged in dialogues with God. The simplicity of his philosophy, the disproportion and incoherence of the developments, the frequent contrasts between the marvels of detail and the fragility of the subject, the inconsistency of the whole — everything, in a word, which could shock and thus instruct and orientate a pitiless young observer toward his future personal art — all these things Baudelaire was to note in himself and separate from the admiration forced upon him by the magic gifts of Hugo, the impurities, the imprudences, the vulnerable points in his work — that is to say, the possibilities of life and the opportunities for fame which so great an artist left to be gleaned.

With some malice and a little more ingenuity than is called for, it would be only too tempting to compare Victor Hugo's poetry with Baudelaire's, with the object of showing how exactly *complementary* the latter is to the former. I shall say no more. It is evident that Baudelaire sought to do what Victor Hugo had not done; that he refrained from all the effects in which Victor Hugo was invincible; that he returned to a prosody less free and scrupulously removed from prose; that he pursued and almost always captured the production of *unbroken charm*, the inappreciable and quasi-transcendent quality of certain poems — but a quality seldom encountered, and rarely in its pure state, in the immense work of Victor Hugo.

Moreover, Baudelaire did not know, or barely knew, the last Victor Hugo, the creator of extreme errors and supreme beauties. *La Légende des*

Siècles appeared two years after *Les Fleurs du mal*. As for Hugo's later works, these were published only long after Baudelaire's death. I attribute to them a technical importance infinitely superior to that of all Hugo's other poems. This is not the place, and I have not the time, to develop this opinion. I shall only sketch a possible digression. What strikes me in Victor Hugo is his incomparable vital energy. Vital energy is longevity and capacity for work combined — longevity multiplied by the capacity for work. During more than sixty years, this extraordinary man was at his desk every day from five o'clock till noon! He unremittingly sought to bring about new combinations of language, to will them, to solicit them and to have the satisfaction of hearing them respond. He wrote one or two hundred thousand lines of poetry and acquired by that uninterrupted exercise a curious manner of thinking which superficial critics have judged as best they could. But, in the course of this long career, Hugo never wearied of realizing and fortifying himself in his art; and he unquestionably sinned more and more against selection, he lost more and more the feeling for proportions, he clogged his verses with indeterminate words, vague and vertiginous, and he studded them so abundantly and facilely with "the abyss," "infinite," "the absolute," that these monstrous terms lost even the appearance of profundity which usage had given them. Yet, what stupendous poems he wrote in the last period of his life — poems incomparable in extent, in external organization, in resonance, in plenitude! In the *Corde d'airain*, in *Dieu*, in the *Fin de Satan*, in the piece on the death of Gautier, the seventy-year-old artist — who had seen all his rivals die, had seen a whole generation of poets born of himself and would even have profited by the inappreciable lessons that the pupil would have given the master had the master lived — attained the highest point of poetic power and of the noble science of versification.

Hugo never ceased to learn by practice; Baudelaire, the span of whose life scarcely exceeded the *half* of Hugo's, developed in quite another manner. One would say he had to compensate for the probable brevity and foreshadowed insufficiency of the short space of time he had to live, by the employment of that critical intelligence of which I spoke above. A score of years were vouchsafed him to attain the peak of his own perfection, to discover his personal field and to define a specific form and attitude which would carry and preserve his name. Time was lacking to realize his literary ambitions by numerous experiments and an extensive output of works. He had to choose the shortest road, to limit himself in his gropings, to be sparing of repetitions and divergences. He had therefore to seek by means of analysis what he was, what he could do, and what he wished to do; and to unite, in himself, with the spontaneous virtues of a poet, the sagacity, the skepticism, the attention and reasoning faculty of a critic.

This is why Baudelaire, although originally a romantic, and even a romantic by taste, sometimes appears as a classic. There are infinite ways of defining the

classic, or of thinking to define him. For today we shall adopt this one: *a classic is a writer who carries a critic within him and who associates him intimately with his work.* There was a Boileau in Racine.

After all, what was there to *choose* in romanticism and how was there to be discerned in it a good and an evil, a false and a true, weaknesses and virtues, unless one were to treat the authors of the first half of the nineteenth century as the men under Louis XIV treated the authors of the sixteenth? *Every classicism assumes a preceding romanticism.* All the advantages that are attributed to "classic" art, all the objections that are made to it, are related to this axiom. *The essence of classicism is to come after.* Order assumes a certain disorder to be overcome. *Composition*, which is artifice, follows some primitive chaos of natural intuitions and developments. *Purity* is the result of infinite operations on the language, and the pursuit of *form* is nothing but the meditated reorganization of the means of expression. Classic consequently implies voluntary, concerted acts which modify "natural" production in conformance with a *clear* and *rational* conception of man and art. But, as the sciences have taught us, we can make a rational work and construct in orderly fashion only by means of a group of *conventions*. Classic art is recognized by the existence, the clearness, the absolutism of these conventions. Whether it is a matter of the three unities, of the prosodic precepts, or of verbal restrictions, these apparently arbitrary rules constitute its force and its weakness. Little understood today and now difficult to defend and almost impossible to observe, they none the less arise from an ancient, subtle, and deep understanding of the conditions of *unmixed* intellectual enjoyment.

Baudelaire, in the midst of romanticism, reminds us of a classic, but he merely reminds and nothing more. He died young, and he moreover lived under the execrable impression given to men of his time by the miserable survival of the old classicism of the Empire. It was in no sense a question of breathing life into what was distinctly dead but, perhaps, of reaching by other means the soul which no longer inhabited the corpse.

The romantics had neglected practically everything demanding concentrated thought. They sought the effects of shock, enthusiasm, and contrast. Neither measure nor rigor nor depth tormented them excessively. They were averse to abstract thinking and to reasoning — and not only in their works, but also in the preparation of their works, which is infinitely more serious. The French seemed to have forgotten their analytical talents. It is fitting to note here that the romantics revolted against the eighteenth century much more than against the seventeenth and readily brought charges of superficiality against men infinitely more learned than they ever were themselves — more curious of facts and ideas, more anxious for precision and for thought on a grand scale.

At a time when science was about to undergo extraordinary developments, romanticism manifested an antiscientific state of mind. Passion and inspiration are persuaded that they are self-sufficient.

But, under quite another sky, in the midst of a population wholly occupied with its material development, still indifferent to the past, organizing its future and giving the most complete liberty to experiments of every kind, there appeared about this time a man who was to consider the things of the mind with a clearness, a sagacity, a lucidity which had never been encountered to such a degree in a head endowed with poetic invention. And among these things was literary production. Until Poe, never had the problem of literature been examined in its premises, reduced to a psychological problem, and approached by means of an analysis in which the logic and the mechanics of effects were deliberately employed. For the first time, the relations between the work and the reader were elucidated and given as the positive foundations of art. This analysis — and this circumstance assures us of its value — applies and is verified as clearly in every domain of literary production. The same observations, the same distinctions, the same quantitative remarks, the same directive ideas adapt themselves equally to works destined to act powerfully and brutally on the emotions — to conquer a public in love with strong emotions or strange adventures — and the most refined types of literature and the delicate organization of the poet's creations.

To say that this analysis holds good for the short story as well as for the poem, that it is as applicable to the construction of the imaginary and fantastic as it is in the reconstitution and literary representation of the probable, is to say that its generality is truly remarkable. A characteristic of what is really general is its fecundity. To arrive at a point from which one dominates a whole field of activity is necessarily to perceive a quantity of possibilities — unexplored domains, roads to be traced, lands to be exploited, cities to be built, relations to be established, methods to be extended. Thus it is not astonishing that Poe, possessing so effective and sure a method, should be the inventor of several different varieties, should have offered the first and most striking example of the scientific tale, of the modern cosmogonic poem, of the novel of criminal investigation, of the introduction into literature of morbid psychological states, and that all his work should manifest on every page an intelligence which is to be observed to the same degree in no other literary career. This great man would today be completely forgotten had not Baudelaire introduced him into European literature. Let us not fail to observe here that Poe's universal glory is weak or contested only in his native country and England. This Anglo-Saxon poet is strangely neglected by his own race.

Another remark: *Baudelaire and Edgar Allan Poe exchanged values*. Each gave to the other what he had, received from the other what he had not. The latter

communicated to the former a whole system of new and profound thought. He enlightened him, he enriched him, he determined his opinions on a quantity of subjects: philosophy of composition, theory of the artificial, comprehension and condemnation of the modern, importance of the exceptional and of a certain strangeness, an aristocratic attitude, mysticism, a taste for elegance and precision, even politics — Baudelaire was impregnated, inspired, deepened by them.

But, in exchange for what he had taken, Baudelaire gave Poe's thought an infinite extension. He proffered it to the future. It was Baudelaire's act, translation, prefaces, that opened this expansion which, in Mallarmé's great line, changes the poet in himself, and assured it to the shade of the unhappy Poe.

I shall not examine all that literature owes to the influence of this marvellous inventor. Whether we take Jules Verne and his disciples, Gaboriau and his like, or whether, in far more elevated styles, we consider the productions of Villiers de l'Isle-Adam or of Dostoevsky, it is easy to see that the *Adventures of J. Gordon Pryn*, the *Mystery of the Rue Morgue*, *Ligeia*, the *Tell-Tale Heart*, have been for them models abundantly imitated, thoroughly studied, and never surpassed.

I only wonder what Baudelaire's poetry, and more generally French poetry, may owe to the discovery of the works of Poe. Some poems in *Fleurs du Mal* derive their sentiment and their material from Poe's poems. Some contain lines which are exact transpositions; but I shall neglect these particular borrowings whose importance is, in a sense, merely local. I shall retain but the essential, which is the very idea that Poe had formed of poetry. His conception, which he set forth in various articles, was the principal factor in the modification of Baudelaire's ideas and art. The fermentation of this theory of composition in Baudelaire's mind, the lessons which he deduced from it, the developments it received from his intellectual posterity — and particularly its great intrinsic value — necessitate our stopping a moment to examine it.

I shall not conceal the fact that the basis of Poe's thoughts is associated with a certain personal metaphysical system. But this system, if it directs and dominates and suggests the theories in question, by no means penetrates them. It engenders them and explains their generation; it does not constitute them.

Poe's ideas on poetry are expressed in several essays, the most important of which (but that which least concerns the technique of English verse) is entitled *The Poetic Principle*. Baudelaire was so deeply struck by this essay, he received so intense an impression from it, that he considered its contents — and not only the contents but the form itself — as *his own property*.

Man cannot help appropriating what seems so exactly made *for him* that, in spite of himself, he regards it as made *by him* — He tends irresistibly to take over what suits his own person so closely; and language itself confuses, under the name of *possession*, the notion of what is adapted to someone and satisfies him entirely, with that of this person's property —

Baudelaire, although enlightened and obsessed by the theory of *The Poetic Principle* — or, rather, because he was enlightened and possessed by it — did not include his translation of this essay in Poe's own works, but introduced the most interesting part, scarcely changed, in the preface to his translation of the *Histoires extraordinaires*. This plagiarism would be open to discussion if the author had not himself, as will be seen, drawn attention to it: in an article on Théophile Gautier he reproduced the whole passage in question, preceding it with these very plain and surprising lines: "It is occasionally permissible, I believe, to quote oneself in order to avoid paraphrasing oneself. I shall consequently repeat — " Then follows the borrowed passage.

What then were Poe's views on Poetry?

I shall briefly sum up his ideas. He analyzes the psychological requirements of a poem. Among these, he puts in the first rank the ones which depend upon the *dimensions* of poetical works. He gives exceptional importance to the consideration of their length. He moreover examines the very conception of these works. He easily establishes that there exists a great number of poems concerned with notions for which prose would have been an adequate vehicle. Neither history, science, nor morality gains by being set forth in the language of the soul. Didactic poetry, historical poetry or ethics, although honored and consecrated by the greatest poets, strangely combine the materials of discursive or empirical knowledge with the creations of the inner being and the emotive forces.

Poe understood that modern poetry should conform to the tendency of an age which drew a sharper and sharper distinction between forms and provinces of activity. He understood that it could claim to realize its own object and produce itself, to some degree, in a *pure state*.

Thus, by analyzing the requirements of poetic delight and defining "absolute poetry" by "exhaustion," Poe showed a way and taught a very strict and fascinating doctrine in which he united a sort of mathematics with a sort of mysticism —

If we now regard *Les Fleurs an mal* as a whole and take the trouble to compare this volume with other poetic works of the same period, we shall not be surprised to find that Baudelaire's work is remarkably consistent with Poe's precepts and consequently remarkably different from the productions of

romanticism. *Les Fleurs du mal* contains neither historical nor legendary poems; nothing based upon a narrative. There are no flights into philosophy. Politics here make no appearance. Descriptions are rare and always pertinent. But all is charm, music, powerful, abstract sensuality — "Luxe, forme et volupté."

In Baudelaire's best poems there is a combination of flesh and spirit, a mixture of solemnity, warmth and bitterness, of eternity and intimacy, a most rare alliance of will with harmony, which distinguishes them clearly from romantic verse as it distinguishes them clearly from Parnassian verse. Parnassus was not excessively kind to Baudelaire. Leconte de Lisle reproached him with sterility. He forgot that a poet's true fecundity does not consist in the number of his poems but rather in the extent of his effects. They can be judged only in time sequence. We see today that the resonance, after more than sixty years, of Baudelaire's unique and far from copious work, still fills the whole poetic sphere, that it is still influential, impossible to neglect, reinforced by a remarkable number of works which derive from it and which are not imitations but the consequences of it. Consequently, to be just, it would be necessary to join to the slender collection of *Les Fleurs du mal* several first-rate works and a number of the most profound and finest experiments that poetry has ever undertaken. The influence of *Poèmes antiques* and *Poèmes barbares* has been less diverse and less surprising.

It must be recognized, however, that this same influence, had it been exerted on Baudelaire, would perhaps have dissuaded him from writing or from retaining some very slack verses that are to be found in his book. Of the fourteen lines of the sonnet "Recueillement," one of his most charming pieces, there are five or six which, to my never-failing surprise, are undeniably weak. But the first and last verses of this poem are so magical that we do not feel the ineptitude of the central part and are quite ready to hold it for null and void. Only a very great poet can effect a miracle of this kind.

A minute ago I spoke of the production of "charm," and now I have pronounced the word "miracle." Doubtless these are terms which must be used sparingly because of the emphasis of their meaning and the facility with which they may be employed; but I should not know how to replace them except by an analogy so long and perhaps so debatable that I shall perhaps be forgiven for sparing him who would have to make it, as well as those who would have to listen to it. I shall remain vague, confining myself to suggesting what it might be. It should be shown that language contains emotive resources mingled with its practical, directly significant properties. The duty, the work, the function of the poet are to bring out and render active these forces of enchantment, these stimulants of the emotional life and intellectual sensibility, which are mixed together in the customary language with the signs and means of communication of ordinary superficial life. Thus the poet

consecrates himself to and consumes himself in the task of defining and constructing a language within the language; and this operation, which is long, difficult, and delicate, which demands a diversity of mental qualities and is never finished, tends to constitute the speech of a being purer, more powerful and profound in his thoughts, more intense in his life, more elegant and felicitous in his speech, than any real person. This extraordinary speech manifests itself and is recognized by the rhythm and harmonies which sustain it, and which should be so intimately and even mysteriously bound to its origin that the sound and the sense can no longer be separated, responding to each other indefinitely in the memory.

Baudelaire's poetry owes its duration and the ascendancy it still has to the plenitude and the unusual clearness of its timbre. At times, this voice yields to eloquence, as happened a little too frequently in the case of the poets of the period; but it almost retains and develops an admirably pure melodic line and a perfectly sustained sonority which distinguish it from all prose.

Baudelaire, in this, reacted very happily against the tendency to prosaic style which has been observable in French poetry since the middle of the seventeenth century. It is remarkable that the man to whom we owe this return of poetry to its essence is also one of the first French writers to be passionately interested in music. I mention this taste, which was shown by the celebrated articles on *Tannhäuser* and *Lohengrin*, because of the later development of the influence of music upon literature — "What was baptized Symbolism is summed up quite simply in the intention common to several families of poets to take back from music what belonged to them — "

To render less imprecise and less incomplete this attempt to explain Baudelaire's importance today, I must now recall what he was as an art critic. He knew Delacroix and Manet. He sought to weigh the respective merits of Ingres and his rival, as he had compared the quite different "realisms" of Courbet and Manet. For the great Daumier he had an admiration which posterity shares. Perhaps he exaggerated the value of Constantin Guys. But, on the whole, his judgments, invariably motivated and accompanied by the finest and most substantial considerations on painting, remain models of their kind, which is so terribly facile, hence so terribly difficult.

But Baudelaire's greatest glory, as I have shown at the outset, is without question to have inspired several great poets. Neither Verlaine, nor Mallarmé, nor Rimbaud would have been what they were had they not read *Les Fleurs du mal* at the decisive age. It would be easy to point in this collection to poems of which the form and the inspiration foreshadow certain pieces by Verlaine, Mallarmé, or Rimbaud. But these are so clear that I shall not enter into details. I shall confine myself to indicating that the sense of the intimate and the powerful, uneasy mixture of mystical emotion and sensual ardor which are

developed in Verlaine; the frenzy for evasion, the impatience excited by the universe, the deep consciousness of sensations and their harmonic resonances which render Rimbaud's brief, violent work so energetic and active, are clearly present and recognizable in Baudelaire.

As for Stéphane Mallarmé, whose earliest poems might be taken for the most beautiful and compact of *Les Fleurs du mal*, he pursued in their subtlest consequences the formal, technical experiments of which Poe's analyses and Baudelaire's essays and commentaries had communicated to him the passion and taught him the importance. While Verlaine and Rimbaud continued Baudelaire in the order of sentiment and sensation, Mallarmé carried his work forward in the province of perfection and poetic purity.

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