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The Truth of Poetry

Tensions in Modern Poetry from Baudelaire to the 1960s

Michael Hamburger

Routledge Revivals

The Truth of Poetry

First published in 1982, *The Truth of Poetry* attempts to answer a seemingly simple question: What kind of truth does poetry offer in modern times? Michael Hamburger's answer to this question ranges over the last century of European and American poetry, and the result is a phenomenology of modern poetry rather than a history of appreciations of individual poets. Stressing the tensions and conflicts in and behind the work of every major poet of the period, he considers the many different possibilities open to poets since Baudelaire. This expansive work of analysis will be of interest to students of English literature, poetry enthusiasts and literary historians.

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MICHAEL HAMBURGER

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PREFACE

WHAT makes 'modern poetry' modern? What makes it more difficult than any other poetry, if indeed it is more difficult than the poetry of Pindar, say, or Dante, or Shakespeare, or Donne, or Góngora, or Blake? Could it be that lyrical poetry after Baudelaire has tended to become different *in kind* from any that preceded it? And, if so, does this change mean that the poets in question were no longer trying to make the same *kinds* of statement as their predecessors?

These are some of the questions that worried me when I started preparing this book, well over ten years ago. What was clear to me even then was that an answer to them called for much more knowledge not of poetry, but of poets and poems, than I was ever likely to acquire. Despite all the distinct traditions and national peculiarities that have continued to affect the practice of poets, the 'modernity' of 'modern poetry' is an international phenomenon. I had read English, American, German, French and Italian poets in their own languages. I had not read the Spanish, Portuguese, Spanish-American, Portuguese-American, Russian, Polish, Yugoslav, Czechoslovakian, Hungarian, Greek, Dutch or Scandinavian poets – to mention only some of the nationalities that ought to have been included in a comprehensive study. Though I have tried hard to extend my reading to poets accessible to me only in or through translations, I found that more often than not such reading did not sink in. My book, in any case, was never intended to be a

survey of all the major poets who have written 'modern' poems. Even within the languages that I know I have omitted poets who may be at least as good as those who are mentioned or dealt with at some length. At the same time I have tried to do justice to the diversity of poetry after Baudelaire. Instead of confining my enquiry to a single line of development defined in advance as 'modern,' I have concentrated on the tensions and conflicts apparent in the work – or behind the work – of every major poet of the period, beginning with the work of Baudelaire himself.

If too much emphasis falls on what poets have said about their poetry rather than on their poems themselves, the reason is that the more strictly critical procedure would have demanded minute analyses of hundreds of poems, many of them in foreign languages. Poems, not poetry or theories about poetry, were my starting-point; but very rigid limits had to be set to a book whose subject, in both time and space, is very nearly limitless. Whatever 'modern poetry' may be, its inception can easily be traced back beyond Baudelaire and beyond such poets as Edgar Allan Poe to whom Baudelaire and his successors have traced their literary ancestry. The antecedents had to be left out; but some awareness of them, I hope, will be implicit in my remarks on the poetry dealt with in this book, no less than an awareness of many poems and poets that could not be quoted or mentioned.

An international anthology like Hans Magnus Enzensberger's *museum der modernen poesie* (Frankfurt, 1960), with translations of all the texts, would help to make up for these necessary omissions, but no comparable anthology has yet been compiled for English-speaking readers. One extremely useful companion to my book is *The Poem Itself*, edited by Stanley Burnshaw and published in 1960 by Holt, Rinehart and Winston, New York. This volume contains analyses of poems by French, German, Spanish, Portuguese and Italian poets, as well as the texts and literal English renderings. Another is the anthology *Modern European Poetry*, edited by Willis Barnstone and others, published by Bantam Books, New York, in 1966. Many other anthologies and critical studies, such as those by C. M. Bowra, could be listed here; but the nature of my study prohibited much reference to secondary material. Even the sketchiest of biblio-

graphies, too, would have overburdened a study that ranges as widely and freely as this one.

Lastly, I should like to emphasize again that this book is not a history of modern poetry, but an attempt to understand its nature, assumptions and functions. This accounts for many obvious and not so obvious omissions. Others arose from a reluctance to repeat what I have written elsewhere or what critical opinion generally has already established. Since the present decade is touched upon, a history would have degenerated into a survey. My only hope was to stick to what I felt to be the crucial issues.

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1

PUERILE UTOPIA AND BRUTAL MIRAGE

1 In 1951 Professor Henri Peyre undertook a brief survey of what he regarded as the more outstanding contributions to the study of Baudelaire. Even at that time, before the centenary of the publication of *Les Fleurs du mal* in 1957 and the centenary of Baudelaire's death in 1967, Professor Peyre felt called upon to deal with some 350 books and articles. The importance of Baudelaire, then, can be taken for granted here, both as the father of modern poetry – 'le premier voyant, roi des poètes, un vrai Dieu'[1]* to cite Rimbaud's deification – and as the prototype of the modern poet whose vision is at once sharpened and limited by a high degree of critical self-awareness. 'With Baudelaire,' Paul Valéry wrote, 'French poetry has at last transcended national frontiers. It has found readers everywhere; it has established itself as the very poetry of modern times.'[2]

Baudelaire was also the author of the last book of poems to become an international best-seller.[3] That this success was posthumous is as relevant to the history of literature as to Baudelaire's life, its extreme wretchedness and its peculiar heroism. A childless man with little interest in the future, Baudelaire derived no comfort from the anticipation of his post-dated success. To write for those unborn was like writing for the dead. Baudelaire's heroism, which at one time he connected with his cult of the dandy – 'the man who never comes out of himself' – was one of deliberate self-containment. With complete

*'The first of seers, king of poets, a true God.'

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sincerity, Baudelaire could say that he 'would be content to write only for the dead'.[4]

The vast body of critical and biographical literature about Baudelaire points to another development that is very much part of the situation of poets later than he; I mean the disproportion between the demand for poetry itself and the demand for literature about poetry. Very few, if any, serious poets since Baudelaire have been able to make a living out of their work; but thousands of people, including poets themselves, have made a living by writing or talking about poetry. This anomaly – paralleled in many ways, as it is, by economic developments conducive to a proliferation of middle-men in all trades and industries – has not only produced conscious or unconscious reactions apparent in the political commitments of several outstanding modern poets, but has also affected the very substance of their work. Ezra Pound's economic theories, and long passages of his *Cantos*, are one obvious instance; Bertolt Brecht's Communism, and his attempts to produce a functional poetry for the man in the street, are another. In this regard, too, Baudelaire was the prototype; not least because he wavered between the aristocratic and the revolutionary positions, sure only about his bitter rejection of the bourgeois and capitalist order that had no place for him. More than any other poet of his time Baudelaire was aware of living in a civilization in which commodities had taken over from things, prices from values; and whenever later poets have turned their attention to economics their thinking has tended to revolve around a theory of values. This is as true of Pound as of Brecht, of T.S.Eliot as of William Carlos Williams.

Even Baudelaire's dilemma has been examined and probed from almost every possible angle – aesthetic, social, psychological, existential, political and theological. Of all the contradictory judgements of his work – beginning with Victor Hugo's attribution to Baudelaire of his own creed of 'Art for the sake of progress,' Sainte-Beuve's advice to him to 'cultivate his angel' and to 'let himself go,' Barbey d'Aurevilly's description of Baudelaire as 'un de ces matérialistes raffinés et ambitieux' incapable of envisaging any kind of perfection other than a material one, followed by the inconsequential warning that 'after *Les Fleurs du mal* only two choices remain to the poet who

made them bloom: either to blow out his brains or to become a Christian' – very few need to be considered here. Almost from the beginning Baudelaire was seen as progressive and reactionary, original and banal, classical and modern, a Christian, a Satanist and a materialist, a consummate craftsman and a bad writer, a rigorous moralist and a man incapable of sincerity.[5] Most of the fundamental disagreements about Baudelaire's attitudes and intentions are due to his own self-contradictions; and he was conscious enough of these self-contradictions to make a general plea for 'a right in which everyone is interested – the right to contradict oneself.' The truth embodied in Baudelaire's work cannot be extracted from this or that confession, this or that apodictic line of verse, but only from the tensions to which his self-contradictions are the surest clue.

2

One reason why Baudelaire remains so fascinating a phenomenon, despite a great deal in his work that has lost its power to give us the 'frisson nouveau' experienced by Victor Hugo in reading *Les Fleurs du mal*, is that Baudelaire bequeathed not only his poetry, but also his dilemma, to generations of later poets and critics. Jean-Paul Sartre's 'existential psycho-analysis' of Baudelaire,[6] which uses what is known about this poet's life to demonstrate that 'men always have the kind of lives they deserve,' is one of several studies of Baudelaire that concentrate on his dilemma rather than on his work. In it Baudelaire's 'negative capability' assumes an exemplary significance, not least because Baudelaire's extreme self-awareness induced him to document his own failings and his own suspicion that he might be 'inferior to those whom he despised.' Baudelaire, in fact, came so close to Sartre's conviction that 'man is never anything but an imposture' that he did not mind leaving the kind of evidence that Sartre could bring against him. Baudelaire's existential dilemma was an acute one, and some of its implications – such as his doubts as to his identity both as a man and as a poet – will be taken up in later chapters of this book. What concerns me at this point are Baudelaire's uncertainties about the function of poetry.

In studying any recent movement in European poetry, or the work of any individual poet later than Baudelaire who has made

some striking innovation, we are almost sure to be faced with problems which may not be intrinsic to the poetry itself, but which determine the nature of our approach to it and divide the judgements of its critics. The private reader can avoid them; the critic or teacher of modern literature cannot. These problems can be traced back considerably further still, but Baudelaire was the poet who lingered at the crossroads of modernity. His critical works show the same momentous hesitations as his poetry; momentous, because he knew the allurements of every direction which later poets were to take, not excluding headlong retreat; and so does the life of this Romantic-Classical-Symbolist poet, conservative pariah, dandy and spokesman of the underworld, solitary and 'man of crowds,' blasphemer and Christian apologist. Both his theory and his practice reveal a conflict between two radically different, if not incompatible, conceptions of the nature and functions of poetry. This conflict corresponds to a crisis which is not confined to literature or the arts; to a greater or lesser extent it has come to affect every activity that involves public or cultural values. Basically it may be the old question of ends and means; but at a time when few people agree as to what are the ultimate ends of human activity, every art, science and craft that was once considered a means tends to assume the character and importance of an ultimate end.

Baudelaire was one of the earlier exponents of the doctrine that the writing of poetry is an autonomous and autotelic activity. 'La poésie,' he wrote in 1859, 'ne peut pas, sous peine de mort ou de déchéance, s'assimiler à la science ou à la morale; elle n'a pas la Vérité pour objet, elle n'a qu'Elle-même.'[7]* It might be objected that this statement occurs in an essay on Gautier, the originator of the French school of 'art for art's sake,' and that Baudelaire was the kind of sympathetic and empathetic critic who tends to assume the point of view of his subject, especially where that subject is also a personal friend. But Baudelaire made similar claims in other essays. That on Barbier (1861), a Socialist poet whose artistically undistinguished verse had some influence on Baudelaire, precisely because of the truth

*'Death or deposition would be the penalty if poetry were to become assimilated to science or morality; the object of poetry is not Truth, the object of poetry is Poetry itself.'

which it conveys, contains the aphorism: 'La poésie se suffit à elle-même.'*

Baudelaire, however, was also an extreme opponent of the same view. 'Le temps n'est pas loin,' he had written in 1852, 'où l'on comprendra que toute littérature qui se refuse à marcher fraternellement entre la science et la philosophie est une littérature homicide et suicide.'† And again in the same year: 'La puérile utopie de l'école de l'art pour l'art, en excluant la morale, et souvent même la passion, était nécessairement stérile.'‡ Lastly, a passage that reads less like a critical judgement than like an intimate confession, akin to Baudelaire's remark that 'art is prostitution' and that 'all books are immoral':[8] 'Le goût immodéré de la forme pousse à des désordres monstrueux et inconnus. . . . La passion frénétique de l'art est un chancre qui dévore le reste; et comme l'absence nette du juste et du vrai dans l'art équivaut à l'absence d'art, l'homme entier s'évanouit; la spécialisation excessive d'une faculté aboutit au néant.'[9]§

A great number of other passages could be adduced from Baudelaire's writings for either side of the argument; to do full justice to Baudelaire, they would have to be related to his practice as a poet and to his development as a man. Nor would Baudelaire be the great poet and critic that he is if he had made no attempt to reconcile these conflicting views of poetry. In practice he did so by the allegorical use of urban imagery to act as a link between the actual and the timeless, the phenomenon and the Idea; by combining a new realism with his search for the archetypes.|| How far he remained from a consistent symbolism, how deeply rooted in the rhetorical and didactic

*'Poetry is sufficient to itself.'

†'The time is not distant when it will be understood that all literature which refuses to march fraternally between science and philosophy is a homicidal and suicidal literature.'

‡'The puerile utopia of art for art's sake, by excluding morality and often even passion, was inevitably sterile.'

§'The immoderate love of form produces monstrous and unprecedented disorders . . . The frantic passion for art is a canker that devours all the rest; and since the complete absence of the right and the true in art amounts to a lack of art, the entire man perishes; the excessive specialization of any one faculty ends in complete annihilation.'

||A good example is the 'gibet symbolique' of *Un Voyage à Cithère* which is also the actual gibbet seen by Gérard de Nerval on the (then British) island of Cerigo, as recorded in his *Voyage en Orient. Les Femmes du Caïre* (1882).

tradition of French verse, can only be exemplified here by a single poem of his maturity, *Causerie*. In consecutive lines of this sonnet he likens his heart to something which the beasts have eaten:

> Ne cherchez plus mon coeur; les bêtes l'ont mangé

and to a palace befouled by the mob:

> Mon coeur est un palais flétrie par la cohue.

The clash between these disparate analogies, which the remaining five lines of the sestet vainly try to resolve, is so disturbing just because Baudelaire was not a Symbolist, but an allegorical poet. If *Causerie* remains a successful poem it is because Baudelaire's allegories do their work even within the bounds of a single line; and they do so because of the compressed rhetoric he had learnt from the classical poets, both French and Latin.

On the level of theory, several attempts to reconcile the two views occur in his last essays. 'Le beau,' he wrote in 1863, 'est fait d'un élément éternel, invariable, dont la qualité est excessivement difficile à déterminer, et d'un élément relatif, circonstanciel, qui sera, si l'on veut, tour à tour ou tout ensemble, l'époque, la mode, la morale, la passion.'[10]* In the same year Baudelaire wrote his ill-fated letter to Swinburne to thank him for his laudatory article on *Les Fleurs du mal*; Baudelaire continues: 'Permettez-moi, cependant, de vous dire que vous avez poussé un peu loin ma défense. Je ne suis pas aussi moraliste que vous feignez obligeamment de le croire. Je crois simplement "comme vous sans doute" que tout poème, tout objet d'art bien fait suggère naturellement une morale. C'est l'affaire du lecteur. J'ai même une haine très décidée contre toute intention morale exclusive dans un poème.'[11]†

The morality of a poem, then, should be implicit, and there is a relation between this implicit morality and the artistic merit

*'Beauty consists of a timeless, invariable element, whose character is exceedingly difficult to define, and of a relative, circumstantial element which we can attribute to the period, the fashion, morality or passion, each in turn or all at once.'

†'Allow me, however, to tell you that you've gone a little too far in defending me. I am not so much of a moralist as you obligingly pretend to believe. I simply believe "like you no doubt" that every poem, every work of art that is well made naturally and necessarily suggests a certain morality. That's the reader's business. I even feel a decided loathing for any exclusively moral intention in a poem.'

of a poem. But Baudelaire does not claim, as later critics have claimed, that the reader has no business to enquire into these moral implications. And of course there is also the very different tone of a later letter, one of Baudelaire's last, in which he confessed that he put his whole heart, his most tender feelings, all his religion – in a disguised form – and all his hatred into that 'terrible book.'[12] It is also worth noting that, despite his partial allegiance to the 'art for art's sake' school, Baudelaire at no time found it necessary to evolve a kind of literary criticism that would concentrate on the aesthetic and stylistic aspects of a poem. His critical essays are brilliant examples of the synthetic, as distinct from the analytical, approach, and they are the work of a man concerned with the public function of the arts as much as with their inner laws. As a critic Baudelaire had more in common with Matthew Arnold than with his acknowledged master, Poe, or his acknowledged disciple, Mallarmé.

But it was Baudelaire the aesthete, the dandy and the Satanist who was acclaimed in the decades that followed his death. Admirers of Villiers de l'Isle-Adam could easily identify themselves with the perpetrator of squibs like this one: 'If a poet demanded of the State the right to keep a couple of bourgeois in his stable, people would be very much astonished; but if a bourgeois asked for some roast poet, people would think it quite natural.' This epigram had all the ingredients required by the *fin de siècle* aesthetes: the anti-humanism, the fine insolence, the tacit equation of the artist with the aristocrat. Even the moralists were taken in by Baudelaire's various masks. Henry James summed up one view of Baudelaire's poetry when he wrote: 'Our impatience is of the same order as that which we should feel if a poet, pretending to pluck the Flowers of Good, should come and present us, as specimens, a rhapsody on plumcake and eau de Cologne.'[13]

3

In 1866, shortly before Baudelaire's death, Mallarmé underwent the crisis known as 'les nuits de Tournon,' during which he lost his religious faith. The outcome of this crisis was his essay *Le Livre, instrument spirituel*, and the sudden discovery that 'everything, in the world, exists in order to culminate in a book.'[14] What Bauledaire had described as a 'puérile utopie'

was established in all seriousness; and Baudelaire, together with Poe, was worshipped as its founder. One would be inclined to ascribe Mallarmé's statement to his youth or to the momentary thrill of having found a substitute for religious faith; but throughout his mature life he expounded an aesthetic doctrine which had its origin in this early crisis. As late as 1894, in his Oxford lecture *La Musique et les lettres*, he made this astonishing statement (though he himself described it as an exaggeration): 'Yes, indeed, Literature exists, and if you like, Literature alone exists, to the exclusion of everything else.' Though this new cult of literature and art derived from the poets, critics and metaphysicians of German Romanticism, in Mallarmé's case it was combined with Platonic or neo-Platonic influences. The same lecture makes this clear, or as clear as Mallarmé's truly jewelled, hard but many-faceted prose style can be said to make anything clear: 'At my risk aesthetically, I set down this conclusion ... that Music and Letters are the alternate face, here enlarged towards darkness, there sparkling, with certainty, of a phenomenon, the only one, I have called it the Idea.'[15] Art, according to Mallarmé, 'simplifies the world,' because by virtue of an inward state the artist reduces external phenomena to their single parent Idea.

What Schiller called the 'aesthetic education of man' most certainly derives from Plato; but it was also Plato who had his doubts as to the fitness of poets to conduct it. The very reason why literature now 'aspired towards the condition of music' was the uncomfortable awareness that the written word, after all, is a medium that resists the purification required of it. The significance of Mallarmé's 'simplification' was that the external world, which already to Delacroix and Baudelaire had been only a 'dictionary,' a 'store of images' or a 'forest of symbols' from which the artist selects his material, has now become no more than 'a brutal mirage.'[16] Whereas Baudelaire's allegories served to link the phenomenon to the Idea – or else served the purely artistic purpose of appealing to more than one sense at a time, by the use of synaesthesia – Mallarmé's withdrawal to a wholly subjective symbolism of the inward state severed all connection between the poet and that 'relative circumstantial' sphere in which extra-artistic values apply. In the most literal sense of the word, art had become a religion, with its own dogma, its artist-

saints, and even its own asceticism, summed up by Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's *Axel* in the aphorism much admired by Mallarmé: 'Vivre? Les serviteurs feront cela pour nous!'* It is no wonder, then, that outside the field of aesthetics Mallarmé's thinking was indeed 'puerile' and inept. What could be more so than his prophecy, from the same lecture: 'If in the future, in France, there is a rebirth of religion, it will be the amplification into a thousand joys of the celestial instinct [instinct de ciel] in each man'? Baudelaire would have laughed at such a *niaiserie*.

Rimbaud's reaction was even more extreme. Although he criticized Baudelaire for 'living in too artistic a milieu' and for failing to invent new forms, he also deified the master in words already cited. Yet while Mallarmé withdrew into the sanctum of Art, Rimbaud prepared to take the next step, to re-create the world by the power of his imagination. Whereas Mallarmé merely disparaged 'le mirage brutal, la cité, ses gouvernements, le code,'† and could therefore devote himself to the refinement of his medium, Rimbaud was in active rebellion against society, morality and even God. It followed that art could be only a means to this end, a weapon of revolt; and when Rimbaud recognized his spiritual defeat in this greater struggle, the mere weapon became a worthless thing. On the rough draft of the work that recorded his struggle and defeat, *Une Saison en enfer*, he scribbled these words: 'Maintenant je puis dire que l'art est une sottise.'‡

Together with Lautréamont, whose *Chants de Maldoror* was almost contemporary with *Une Saison en enfer*, Rimbaud became the precursor of Surrealism and other experimental movements of this century. It is worth remembering, therefore, that Rimbaud and Lautréamont regarded their own experiments as failures; not on artistic grounds, but because the wheel had come full circle: as Baudelaire predicted, the hypertrophy of art must inevitably lead to its atrophy. Rimbaud's recantation took the form of silence; his rebellion had been too wholehearted and too extreme to permit such a conciliatory half-measure as Verlaine's *Sagesse*. Rimbaud's renunciation of literature was as complete as his former faith in the power of the written word –

*'As for living, our servants can do that for us.'
†'... that brutal mirage, the city, its governments, the law.'
‡'I can say now that art is an imbecility.'

but in the written word as a means of changing the world. As for Lautréamont, he recanted in his last work, *Poésies*; the creator of *Maldoror*, whose search for a kindred spirit had culminated in sexual intercourse with a shark, and who had exclaimed, 'moi seul, contre l'humanité!'* now advocated a return to the 'impersonal poetry' of the classical period and to moral conformism. 'The aim of poetry,' he now wrote, 'should be practical truth.'[17]

The wheel had come full circle – by 1873! But the history of literature shows no reluctance to repeat itself; and no wonder, since it's made by individuals whose aspirations and follies are not determined by history alone, nor by those literary and philosophical 'trends' in which historians are forced to deal. The same wheel is turning still; rather more sluggishly, perhaps, but steadily all the same. Mallarmé's lecture of 1894 shows no awareness at all of the implications so clear to the historian's hindsight. Two years later Hofmannsthal wrote to Stefan George, Mallarmé's German disciple, asking him to receive an Austrian friend, Count Joseph Schönborn ('of the Bohemian branch of the house'), who was on a visit to Germany. George replied indignantly, 'You write a sentence, my dear friend: "he belongs to life, not to any of the arts" which I would almost regard as a blasphemy. If a man belongs to no art, has he the right to claim that he belongs to life at all? What? At the very most in semi-barbaric ages.'[18]

Later in his life it became evident enough to George that he was indeed living in a semi-barbaric age; and it may even have occurred to him that the gulf fixed by the arrogance of his letter was as acute a symptom as any of this barbarism. Hofmannsthal certainly knew it, and gave up lyrical poetry; and so did Yeats know it, for he included the aristocracy and the poor in his ideal order, as well as the artist (a rather more humane variant of Baudelaire's triad of 'respectable beings': 'The priest, the warrior and the poet. To know, to kill and to create'[19]).

It was inevitable that 'life' should counter-attack. Max Nordau's *Degeneration* appeared in 1893. Tolstoy's tract *What Is Art?* appeared in 1897 and 1898. Already in 1887 Tolstoy had written to Romain Rolland: 'Our whole trouble today is due to this: that the so-called civilized people, supported by the

*'I alone, against humanity!'

learned and the artists, are a privileged caste, like the priesthood; and this caste has the faults of every caste. It debases and dishonours the principle in whose name it was formed. What we call our learning and art is nothing but boundless humbug, a great superstition which usually takes us in as soon as we have emancipated ourselves from the superstitions of the Church.'[20] Tolstoy's attack on Shakespeare followed in 1903. No more recent pronouncement has improved on Tolstoy's description of Shakespeare as 'a fourth-rate artist' whose 'power of characterization was nil.' In *What Is Art?*, however, Tolstoy was mainly concerned with the modern aestheticism which he also castigated in *The Kreutzer Sonata*.

Tolstoy's literary judgements were so distorted by the inner crisis which he suffered at this time – a crisis of self-revulsion and self-reproach – and by his position in a society that had only lately ceased to be feudal, that they can be taken seriously only as a symptom of what was to come. The vitalism of Nietzsche was a much more shattering influence in the West. Though on the side of aestheticism, Nietzsche had undertaken the job of relating this doctrine to the philosophical situation in Europe; he showed that the religion of art was 'the last metaphysical activity within European nihilism.' He related it to his religion of the anti-Christ, his immoralism and his own version of Darwinism, 'the will to power.' Another little turn of the wheel, and barbarism revealed a new face. The Nietzschean revolution produced the strange phenomenon of the cultured man with a passionate hatred for culture, the artist ashamed of art. 'To read Rimbaud or the Seventh Canto of *Maldoror*,' André Gide confessed in his diaries, 'makes me ashamed of my works, and disgusted with everything that is a mere product of culture.'

How classical Baudelaire's attitude seems in view of this later *trahison des clercs*, the intellectual's abject desertion to the enemy's side! 'Tout ce qui est beau et noble,' Baudelaire believed, or at least asserted, 'est le résultat de la raison et du calcul.'[21]* True, the new vitalism was a development of aestheticism, with the stress not on beauty, but sensation; it was aestheticism released from its ethical, social and cultural inhibitions. Baudelaire, who had 'foresuffered all,' knew its temptations too; hence his warning against the excesses of art-worship,

*'Everything beautiful and noble is the result of reason and calculation.'

which would not only play into the hands of the barbarians, but turn artists themselves into the worst enemies of art.

4 This brief sketch has confined itself to the attitudes and statements of imaginative writers. To arrive anywhere near completeness – as far as anything so selective, drastic and spasmodic can arrive at completeness – it would have to trace the dilemma of literary criticism, whose history runs exactly parallel with the one I have attempted to outline. In its effort to keep pace with the imaginative writers, much of the most intelligent criticism of our time has become 'Criticism for Criticism's sake,' as D.J. Enright has called it. Although, as long ago as 1924, Edwin Muir wrote that 'all criticism is criticism for criticism's sake,'[22] his observation does not contradict Enright's; for Muir continued: 'It is a moral habit carried over into art.' Instead of mediating between the work of art and a non-specialist public, it has become as specialized and as difficult as modern poetry is reputed to be; more difficult often, because poetry has its own way of communicating complex perceptions, and because the critics have added their own complexities to those of their texts. There are signs at present that the reaction to the New Criticism may grow as violent and as perverse as Tolstoy's protest against the debilitating effect of art. In fact Tolstoy's exasperation was mild compared to that of Professor Erich Heller's *The Disinherited Mind,* with its insistence that 'the poetry is the ideas, and the ideas are the poetry.' This was anti-aestheticism with a vengeance, in that it led the author to condemn Rilke's *Duino Elegies* because its ideas are wrong, and to conclude that Kafka 'had good reason to decree that his writings should be burnt.'

Erich Heller's pronouncements on the relationship between truth and poetry are a drastic formulation of opinions very widely held, but rarely expressed with anything like his eloquence, by persons whose quarrel with modern poetry is either that they do not 'understand' it or that they disagree with what they do understand. 'Without that all-pervasive sense of truth which bestows upon happier cultures their intuitive order of reality,' Heller wrote in *The Disinherited Mind,*

poetry – in company with all the other arts – will be faced with ever increasing demands for ever increasing 'creativeness.' For the 'real order' has to be 'created' where there is no intuitive conviction that it exists. The story of the rise of the poet from the humble position of a teller of tales and a singer of songs to the heights of creation, from a lover of fancies to a slave of imagination, from the mouthpiece of divine wisdom to the begetter of new gods, is a story as glorious as it is agonizing. For with every new form in poetic creativity the world as it is, the world as created without the poet's inventions, becomes poorer; and every new impoverishment of the world is a new incentive to poetic creativeness. In the end the world as it is is nothing but a slum to the spirit, and an offence to the artist. Leaving its vapours behind in audacious flight, his genius settles in a world wholly created by the creator-poet: *Gesang ist Dasein.*[23]

Despite its wild generalizations – beginning with the evocation of those mythical 'happier cultures' in which poets 'tell tales' and 'sing songs' – this passage does say something apt about the developments culminating in Mallarmé's disparaging reference to the external world as a 'brutal mirage.' Yet it is difficult to understand how and why the modern poet's inventions come to impoverish the world. This presupposes readers of poems like Rilke's *Duino Elegies* whose response to the poetry is so pedantically literal and abjectly passive that they abandon the world they know in favour of the world 'created' for them by Rilke, bursting into song in order to 'be.' Yet even Rilke's most devoted admirers and disciples did no such thing. It is Heller's own literal approach to poetry that is at fault. He treats every work of literature, imaginative and historical alike, as though its primary function were to expound a body of beliefs and ideas:

To make poetry is to think. Of course, it is not *merely* thinking. But there is no such activity as 'merely thinking,' unless we confine the term to purely logical or mathematical operations. Language is not quite so stupid as some of our analytical philosophers seem to assume. It knows what it does when it allows us to say that we 'think of someone,' and when it calls actions deficient in kindness or imagination 'thoughtless.' 'Thinking' and 'thought' in these phrases are no mere manner of speaking. The words mean what they say: thought and thinking. And if we have it on authority still higher than Goethe's or Mr Eliot's that in the beginning was *logos*, the word, the thought, the meaning, we should think twice before we answer the question whether or not a poet thinks.[24]

Of course we should; but the real question for a reader of poetry is *how* a particular poet is thinking in a particular poem or part of a poem, and how this mode of thinking works in relation to the totality of what the poem enacts. In his eagerness not to compromise with the aesthetes Heller goes so far as to assert that

> the reasons why one should, or should not, accept the beliefs inherent in Rilke's later poetry are not different in kind from the reasons why one should, or should not, accept the beliefs of Marxism, or of the Oxford Group, or of anthroposophy. To say, 'but he is merely a poet' (and not, I suppose, a sectarian hawker, an ideologist or a political propagandist) is to suggest that, by his profession, he is less capable of perceiving truth than others; to say, 'but his poetry is too beautiful to be true' is to insinuate that the closer the poetry is to truth, the less successful it will be as art, because all truth is necessarily ungainly.[25]

This argument is so preposterously oversimplified as to be meaningless. Even in this century there have been poets like Brecht who wanted their verse to be understood as Heller asks us to understand all poetry. Brecht, among other things, was a 'political propagandist'; but Brecht also knew that in being that he was reversing the main trend of poetry in his time, a trend of which he considered Rilke a representative. Heller's insistence that everywhere and at all times 'the poetry is the ideas, and the ideas are the poetry' slurs over the very distinctions which it is the main business of criticism to establish; and his constant appeals to moral, metaphysical and religious criteria which are never stated or defined greatly weaken his case against those modern poets, like Rilke, who glorified the poetic imagination. A numinous 'truth' or 'logos' is an ineffectual weapon in the hand of a critic who sets out to expose the pseudo-beliefs of poets, yet can also write: 'We have become so democratic in our belief of thought that we are convinced that Truth is determined by a plebiscite of facts.' Heller is fond of quoting Pascal's remark about 'the heart's reasons' of which reason is ignorant; but he forgets that to Pascal, a mathematician after all, it was 'la *dernière* démarche de la raison de connaître qu'il y a une infinité de choses qui la surpassent.'* Heller's impatience with the facts of literature – that is, with the specific poem or play from which he extracts a text for his sermon against modern

*'... the last resort of reason to realize that countless things are beyond it.'

literature as a whole – makes him a bad reader. As such, he can only confirm the prejudices of those who think that poetry is only a 'beautiful' way of saying things that can be said in prose. That function is not only obscurantist but utterly unhelpful, since it cuts the knot which literary criticism should endeavour to untie. It may be that the aesthetic order will never again be re-integrated with a larger one, as Kierkegaard set out to do in Baudelaire's lifetime. What is certain is that it can't be done by merely holding out Dante as a yardstick for all and sundry, and finding that Shakespeare and Goethe – not to mention Hölderlin and Rilke – were too modern to pass the test. Nor can it be done by merely returning to Matthew Arnold's position in 1863, before Art – at least in England – had proclaimed her independence from Life, and saying that 'poetry is simply the most beautiful, impressive and widely effective mode of saying things, and hence its importance.'[26] Arnold was a great critic because he tried to maintain a proper balance between the various functions of poetry, as T.S.Eliot, with very different premises and aims, did in his time; whereas most of the New Criticism has failed to grapple with the dilemma at all. Yet the dilemma was implicit in I.A.Richards' dictum that 'it is never what a poem *says* that matters, but what it is.' Erich Heller's literalism simply reverses the dictum; but the dictum itself implied that what a poem says is something different, and separable, from what it is; and that the discerning reader is the one most conscious of this difference. What criticism has failed to do is to account for this difference without losing sight of at least one of the various functions of literature, or giving it up as a bad job. The analytical method is incomplete if it doesn't end by reassembling the parts; and this final process is as liable as any other synthetic process to produce a new machine.

5

Both as a poet and as a critic, Baudelaire's practice was more classical than is generally granted. Because he was an allegorical poet, rather than a Symbolist, most of his poetry conforms to Samuel Johnson's classical prescription that 'the business of a poet is to examine, not the individual, but the species, to remark general properties and large appearances; he does not number the streaks of the tulip, or describe the different

shades in the verdure of the forest. He is to exhibit in his portraits of nature such prominent and striking features, as recall the original to every mind; and must neglect the minuter discriminations. . . .'[27] Baudelaire's attitudes, on the other hand, were bound to reflect his situation in his own age, and particularly the isolation which, as Frank Kermode has emphasized in *Romantic Image*, was the common predicament of the Romantics and Symbolists. Baudelaire's self-contradictions, and his dilemma itself, were due to the almost intolerable strain of being a classical, or near-classical, artist in a modern society.

Baudelaire, therefore, fell into the confusion which is my chief concern in this chapter: to attribute a social, ethical and even religious significance to preoccupations that were in fact aesthetic. The confusion is very common; few persons of aesthetic sensibility are not sometimes guilty of it. What it amounts to in this particular context is the failure to distinguish between our response to what is ugly and our response to what is evil. The confusion is made all the easier because the aesthetic order touches on the moral in the sense of *mores* or *moeurs*; and the words 'sordid' and 'squalid' seem to apply to both orders. (W.H.Auden made the connection in his line, 'New styles of architecture, a change of heart.') But Baudelaire chose exactly the right word to characterize the utopia of 'art for art's sake': 'puerile,' because it is children who are least capable of making the distinction, most apt to base ethical judgements on physical appearances (though very young children are not put off by physical ugliness).

This confusion has led to two other, related confusions. In asserting their belief in 'art for art's sake' many writers have failed to distinguish between their personal motive for writing and the function of all literature. For a modern poet to say that he writes for the poem's sake is neither strange nor shocking; it is simply another way of saying that he is neither a knave nor a fool. The error arises when the poet proceeds to identify his motive with the nature or function of poetry itself, or when he constructs a philosophy of life on the laws of his craft or on his personal situation as a poet. It was the ideal of Gottfried Benn to write 'the absolute poem, the poem without faith. The poem without hope, the poem addressed to no one, the poem made of words which you assemble in a fascinating way.'[28] Absolute

poems are 'phenomena, historically ineffective, without practical consequences. That is their greatness.' But Gottfried Benn published his poems; and he didn't even disdain such aids to publication as the radio talk, the public lecture and the press interview. Mere publication would have sufficed to make his poems historically effective, and to give them practical consequences. To point out this inconsistency is not to convict Benn of hypocrisy; I do so to indicate that communication is a function intrinsic to poetry, even where the poet is aware of no wish to communicate anything in particular, where he writes for the dead or for no one. A poem can be a monologue; but it is a monologue spoken aloud.

The second error is to suppose that there must be a fixed ratio between the degree of autonomy attained by a work of literature, and its quality; that this ratio depends on the poet's belief; and that a poet who acknowledges no commitment to anything other than his art is therefore incapable of writing a bad poem, let alone a vulgar poem. Commitment, again, is not only a matter of conscious attitudes; merely to write is to commit oneself, and to reveal a commitment that cannot possibly be confined to the aesthetic order. Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, for instance, owes most of his reputation to his attitude; as a writer of fiction he was inferior to many of the popular novelists of his time. And as Baudelaire remarked, there is also the vulgarity that consists in insulting a crowd.

The poet as aesthete is the poet turned specialist, the poet who cannot see further than his specialization and turns it into a creed. In so far as he approved the 'art for art's sake' school, Baudelaire showed that he couldn't resist the general trend towards specialization. His solitude was against him. His cult of dandyism – as 'the last refulgence of heroism in decadent ages'[29] – was his desperate attempt to make sense of his solitude; it was one of a long succession of auxiliary religions to which artists have resorted merely to keep going at all. Yet it was Baudelaire the classicist who noted in his journal, under the heading of *Dandyisme*: 'Who is the superior man? He is not the specialist. He is the man of leisure and of general education. To be rich and love work.'[30] But Baudelaire for the greater part of his life was anything but rich, and he hated work. So he became the first to complain of the 'immense nausea of advertisements,' a

borderline nausea, half aesthetic, half moral, which he interpreted as disgust with the 'sordid' materialism of the age. At the same time he knew that – except in its highest, Platonic reaches – aestheticism is also materialism, and that it was his own aestheticism that divided him from the crowd. 'As for me, who sometimes find it in myself to assume the ludicrous role of prophet, I know that I shall never find there the charity of a physician. Lost in this vile world, buffeted by the crowd, I am like a man tired out, who, looking back, into the deep chasm of years, sees nothing but disillusionment and bitterness, and looking forward, sees only a cataclysm that contains nothing new, neither knowledge nor grief.'[31]

By the time he had wholly emerged from this vicious circle and acquired the 'charity of a physician,' Baudelaire had almost ceased to write; but there are more traces of that charity in his earlier work than he allowed himself to admit. Baudelaire feared nothing so much as that the spiritual passion which he put into his poetry might be mistaken for the false spirituality of the age; that is why he wrote that the one important thing was 'to be a great man and a saint *in one's own eyes*' (*pour soi-même*).

In judging Baudelaire's pronouncements on society, politics, ethics and religion, it is essential to distinguish between two kinds: those made by the specialist concerned only with his own trade, a trade for whose products there was little demand at the time, and those which have the special value of a vantage point which he indicated in his journal: 'I have no convictions, as people of my century understand the word, because I have no ambition.' There is no point in trying to make sense of the former kind – other than biographical and historical sense; to do so is to be confronted with a Baudelaire who was a socialist, a conservative and a fascist, a mystical pantheist and an orthodox Catholic, a Satanist, a puritan and a pagan, etc., etc. It is also essential to distinguish between what Baudelaire thought as a man and what he thought as an artist. Thus Baudelaire wrote: 'Je ne crois pas qu'il soit scandalisant de considérer toute infraction à la morale, au beau moral, comme une espèce de faute contre le rythme et la prosodie universels.'* This is an example

*'I do not think it is shocking to consider every infraction of morality, of the morally beautiful, as a kind of offence against the universal rhythm and prosody.' *Théophile Gautier*.

of the auxiliary religion; it is a statement designed to throw a very flimsy bridge across the gulf between the aesthetic and the ethical orders. The fact is that Baudelaire the man didn't believe in a 'universal rhythm and prosody' which would have co-ordinated the aesthetic and the ethical functions of poetry without any effort on the poet's part; but the artist would have liked to believe in it, and the pseudo-belief was useful to a poet.

There is no need to despair of modern poetry because it calls for distinctions of that kind, or to deny oneself the pleasure of reading it for fear of being corrupted by its 'wrong' ideas. It is up to the critic and the reader to recognize the auxiliary religions where they have become part of the poetry instead of merely helping to support the poet in a difficult job. I doubt that a reader who is not a poet (or indeed a reader who isn't Rilke) could live for long by the aesthetic religion implicit, and occasionally explicit, in Rilke's *Duino Elegies*; but that reader could still be the wiser for having entered into an experience that wouldn't otherwise have been his; and by entering into it, I mean wholeheartedly, without prejudgement. If the experience leaves a deposit of ideas, rather than sensations, these will have to be put in their place at a later stage. The discrimination demanded then is no different from that which life demands of us; the people and things we come up against aren't labeled 'good' or 'bad.' True and false ideas appeal to us in every newspaper, not to mention the advertisements that nauseated Baudelaire.

Yet the thing itself tells no lies; this is as true of the poem as an object well and honestly made (and A.E. Housman said that poetry is 'more physical than intellectual'[32]) as of purely physical products. In both cases we may have to dissociate it from the claims that have been attached to it, even from claims imprinted on the thing itself. If this growing need to discriminate and to dissociate is bewildering, conducive to Tolstoy's exasperation with literature and to Baudelaire's disgust with life, or else to cynicism, indifference and deliberate philistinism, literature also provides a remedy; it has the power to make new associations between the things which, in life, tend more and more to 'fall apart.' The distinction of modern poetry is that it has concentrated on numbering 'the streaks of the tulip'; but again and again it has shown its power to universalize the

particular, to give a new centre to experiences which by all the classical criteria should be peripheral, because they are the experiences of specialists. The modern poet may 'number the streaks of the tulip' and not only think, but hope, that he has left it at that; but, whether he likes it or not, he has said something new about flowers, and about men.

2

THE TRUTH OF POETRY

1 THAT poetry embodies or enacts truth of one kind or another has hardly ever been denied by poets themselves, even by poets who have gone further than Baudelaire in the search for a syntax liberated from prose usage, for an imagery not subservient to argument, or for a diction determined more by acoustic values than by semantic exigencies. It is an error to assert that poetry since Baudelaire's time has developed only in one of those directions. Different poets have explored different possibilities of development; and quite a number of considerable poets no less modern than those who would trace their descent from Mallarmé have taken none of those directions, but aspired to a bareness and directness of statement that far exceeds anything demanded by the strictest classical canons. To Dryden the words that make up a poem were 'the image and ornament' of the thought which it was the primary function of that poem to 'convey to our apprehension,'[1] though Dryden was writing about verse translation, and even his practice as a poet and translator of poetry does not always accord with so rigid a definition. The modern poets in question differ from Dryden in having no use for ornament, and no use for images or metaphors that are ornamental in the sense of merely adding grandeur or dignity to their thoughts. The important thing for the readers and critics of modern poems is not to expect too simple or constant an approach to the many kinds of truth which different kinds of poems are able to convey.

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Reviewing Bonamy Dobrée's *The Broken Cistern* in 1954, Donald Davie quoted this well-known passage from A.E. Housman's 1933 lecture *The Name and Nature of Poetry*:[2]

> Poems very seldom consist of poetry and nothing else; and pleasure can be derived also from their other ingredients. I am convinced that most readers, when they think they are admiring poetry, are deceived by inability to analyse their sensations, and that they are really admiring, not the poetry of the passage before them, but something else in it, which they like better than poetry.

Davie went on to comment:

> I.A.Richards, in *Practical Criticism*, proved that this was so. Now Bonamy Dobrée argues that poetry nowadays has few readers of this sort; and this, too, though it cannot be proved, seems very likely. The surprising thing is that he thinks this is a pity. One would think that if the poet no longer has many readers of this sort he is well rid of them. But Professor Dobrée believes that poetry can be a civilizing influence even on people who read poems for something other than their poetry. This is, to say the least, highly questionable, for *Practical Criticism* seemed to prove also that if poetry was read in this wrong-headed way it was a debilitating influence, not civilizing at all.

It would be pleasant to be able to agree with Davie that 'poetry nowadays has few readers of this sort'; but quite a number of them are still to be met at public poetry readings, in university seminars and in other unlikely places. 'Poetry,' Housman said in the same lecture, 'is not the thing said, but a way of saying it. Can it then be isolated and studied by itself? For the combination of language with its intellectual content, its meaning, is a union as close as can well be imagined.' If critics as expert as Professor Dobrée insist on separating 'the thing said' from 'the way of saying it,' or insist that poetry, after all, is 'the thing said,' as Professor Heller has done, readers of that sort will most probably be met for a long time to come; and not only in those countries where any other sort of reader is considered ideologically suspect. Even after Symbolism, Imagism, Futurism, Expressionism, Surrealism, and the new Concrete poetry, not only critics and readers, but poets too, remain divided on those questions to which Baudelaire could not give an unequivocal answer; and the division, in many cases,

remains an inner division, one of those quarrels with himself out of which a poet, as Yeats said, makes poetry.

Donald Davie himself once wrote an eloquent appeal for a kind of poetry that 'must reek of the human' and show no 'loss of faith in conceptual thought'; and, as he argued at the time, in *Articulate Energy*,[3] such a poetry would have to return to a syntax more logical than dynamic. Though his own position has probably changed since that time, his analysis of modern poetic syntax, and of the philosophical and psychological changes that led to its adoption, is still valid. Above all, he was right to stress the importance of poetic syntax:

> It is from that point of view, in respect of syntax, that modern poetry, so diverse in all other ways, is seen as one. And we can define it thus: *What is common to all modern poetry is the assertion or the assumption (most often the latter) that syntax in poetry is wholly different from syntax as understood by logicians and grammarians.* When the poet retains syntactical forms acceptable to the grammarian, this is merely a convention which he chooses to observe. But never before the modern period has it been taken for granted that all poetic syntax is necessarily of this sort. This is, surely, the one symbolist innovation that is at the root of all the technical novelties that the symbolist poets introduced. Later poets could refuse to countenance all the other symbolist methods and still, by sharing, consciously or not, the symbolist attitude to syntax, they stand out as post-symbolist.

In the same study Donald Davie quoted a comparison by Paul Valéry between Mallarmé's poetic syntax – a syntax, incidentally, which Mallarmé also succeeded in carrying over into prose – and the 'attitudes of men who in algebra have examined the science of forms and the symbolical part of the art of mathematics. This type of attention makes the structure of expressions more felt and more interesting than their significance or value.' Davie's conclusion was that 'the syntax of Mallarmé appeals to nothing but itself, to nothing outside the world of the poem.'[4]

Yet Mallarmé has also been seen as the representative of a tradition as old as poetry itself. Elizabeth Sewell, from whose book *The Structure of Poetry* Davie quoted the remark by Valéry, has made just that connection in her later book, *The Orphic Voice*.[5] There she cites Mallarmé's own reference to the Orphic tradition: 'l'explication orphique de la terre, qui est le seul