

PATRICIA CLEMENTS

Baudelaire and the English Tradition



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BAUDELAIRE AND THE ENGLISH TRADITION

BAUDELAIRE

— & —

THE ENGLISH TRADITION

PATRICIA CLEMENTS

PRINCETON UNIVERSITY PRESS

PRINCETON, NEW JERSEY

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for my parents
and for
Meryle & Alder
&
Isobel

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NOTE REGARDING TRANSLATIONS

Wherever possible, I have used the following translations (and abbreviated as indicated). The footnotes give, in italics, the first word of the French quotation; the translation then follows.

- C — Baudelaire, *Selected Writings on Art and Artists*, Translated with an Introduction by P. E. Charvet (London, 1972).
- M — Baudelaire, *The Mirror of Art, Critical Studies*, Translated and Edited by Jonathan Mayne (New York, 1956).
- B — J.-K. Huysmans, *Against Nature*, A New Translation of *A Rebours* by Robert Baldick (London, 1959, repr. 1973).

BAUDELAIRE AND THE ENGLISH TRADITION

Il est vrai que la grande tradition s'est perdue, et que la nouvelle n'est pas faite.

—Baudelaire

“De l'Héroïsme de la Vie Moderne,” *Salon de 1846*.

INTRODUCTION

The most striking feature in an account of Baudelaire's post-humous literary life is that he has by so many poets, novelists, and critics of art and literature been regarded as a progenitor. Most of the important developments in French literature in the generations between the 1860's and the 1920's defined themselves in relation to him, and the act of tracking backwards to a source in his work furnishes a recurrent scene in modern French writing. Huysmans' *A Rebours* provides the best-known instance: its decadent, scholarly, origin-seeking protagonist, Des Esseintes, finds in *Les Fleurs du Mal* the source of all that is expressive, significant, and profound in modern literature. He treats the book with exceptional, almost gothic, reverence, making the object reflect in its physical qualities the distinction of the words it embodies. His copy is specially printed (in "les admirables lettres épiscopales de l'ancienne maison Le Clere"), made up in a special format ("large . . . rappelant celui des missels"), specially bound (in "une mirifique et authentique peau de truie choisie entre mille, couleur chair"), and specially decorated ("de dentelles noires au fer froid, miraculeusement assorties par un grand artiste"). In that singular book, which commands a more than merely secular descriptive language, Des Esseintes locates origins: Verlaine, he reflects, derives from its psychological side, Théodore Hannon from its plastic vision, and the whole immense "horizon" of modern literature from its "unforgettable doors."¹

Other generations of French writers, too, followed the stream of modernism back to its source in Baudelaire, who, for Rim-

les admirables . . . the admirable episcopal type of the old house of Le Clere . . . large format similar to that of a mass-book . . . a mirific and authentic flesh-coloured pigskin, one in a thousand, dotted all over where the bristles had been and blind-tooled in black with designs of marvellous aptness chosen by a great artist (B, 146).

baud, it will be remembered, was "le premier voyant, roi des poètes, *un vrai dieu*," and even after the earliest generations of symbolists had been succeeded by newer poetic powers, Baudelaire retained his mythic status as the originator of the modern. Remy de Gourmont, who carried the symbolist tradition into the twentieth century (and into modern English criticism), wrote in *Le Livre des Masques*, which went through more than a dozen editions, that "Toute la littérature actuelle et surtout celle que l'on appelle symboliste, est baudelairienne, non sans doute par la technique extérieure, mais par la technique interne et spirituelle." The history of the modern, he said, could be told backwards from himself, through Henri de Régnier, to Verlaine and Mallarmé. Then, he wrote, "Par eux, on descend le long de la montagne triste jusqu'en la cité dolente des *Fleurs du Mal*." The end of that recurring descent, that repeated retrospective pilgrimage, is the beginning of modern writing. In accounts of the history of modern French literature, *Les Fleurs du Mal* is a sacred book—and the ironies of that transfiguration are no less apparent now than they were when they were created. But these accounts make of *Les Fleurs du Mal* a remarkably new dispensation, and though, like the first chapter of the first Gospel, they are often characterized by their recitation of *begats*, they lead not, in what Swift designated as the best in the old style of criticism, to "the most Antient of all,"² but to a departure, to discovery of what Baudelaire himself had hailed as "l'avènement du *neuf!*"

That Baudelaire should appear so insistently in French writing as the source of the modern is hardly a surprise: he is, after all, an incontestably great, modern, French poet. It was with his works that Gallimard launched its Bibliothèque de la Pléiade.³ But it is altogether more remarkable that he should appear, no less insistently, as the begetter of the modern in English literature. Yet from the moment his work appeared in England, poets and critics valued it (or feared it) chiefly because of what they saw as its originating power. When Swinburne introduced Baudelaire to English readers in the 1860's, he proposed him

Toute la . . . All present-day literature, and especially the literature we call symbolist, is baudelairean, not, probably, in external technique, but in internal and spiritual technique.

Par eux . . . Through them, we come down the sad mountain to the piteous city of *Les Fleurs du Mal*.

l'avènement . . . the advent of the *new!* (M, 37).

as a model for English poets, suggesting that a carefully cultivated, wholly intentional imitation of his work could provide an escape from what he saw as the narrow confinements of "tradition and the taste of the greater number of readers." When Eliot wrote on him, long after Swinburne had been, to all appearances, forgotten, he too proposed him as a model, as "the greatest exemplar in *modern* poetry in any language, for his verse and language is the nearest thing to a complete renovation that we have had." Between Swinburne and Eliot there exist several generations of English poets, who, like them, nominated Baudelaire as precursor and implicated him in their attempts at "renovation."

These English writers, like the French, paid their tribute in several kinds. Baudelaire's history in English imaginative literature is initiated by Swinburne's representation, in "Ave atque Vale," of an act of commemoration, in which he lays an offering on Baudelaire's grave, and Baudelaire and his book are made part of the iconography of English literature in sometimes surprising ways. His face—or rather, his death-mask—is the model for the features of Huxley's fictional Spandrell in *Point Counter Point*; his features, as they were described by his French contemporaries and friends, supply the visual qualities of Pater's "modern poet" in *Gaston de Latour*; his portrait commands the descriptive attention of J. C. Squire on more than one occasion. His book, too, is permanently embedded in English poetry and prose as an icon, "bound in some Nile-green skin that has been powdered with gilded nenuphars and smoothed with hard ivory," as in Wilde, or darkening a youthful paradise, "as though with lines of rain," as in the memoirs of Sacheverell Sitwell.

Since his introduction to English readers and writers, Baudelaire has also drawn the critical attention of a wide range of poets, novelists, and critics of literature and culture. There are essays on his work by, among others, Swinburne, William Allingham, George Saintsbury, Henry James, Arthur Symons, Havelock Ellis, Lafcadio Hearn, Richard Aldington, J. C. Squire, T. S. Eliot, John Middleton Murry, Christopher Isherwood, and W. H. Auden. His work has attracted less formal or direct critical comment from William Michael Rossetti, Robert Buchanan, Oscar Wilde, F. S. Flint, John Gould Fletcher, W. B. Yeats, Edith Sitwell, D. H. Lawrence, and Lytton Strachey. There are, furthermore, several volumes of the sort of George Moore's *Flowers*

of *Passion* or of J. C. Squire's *Poems and Baudelaire Flowers*, and translations of his work, which began to appear as early as 1869, mainly of his poetry but also of his prose-poems, art criticism, and letters, abound. Among his translators are Lord Alfred Douglas, Arthur Symons, Edna St. Vincent Millay, John Payne, James Elroy Flecker, Edward Lascelles, T. Sturge Moore, Aleister Crowley, Aldous Huxley, Roy Campbell, and Robert Lowell. The "impact" of Baudelaire—the word is Eliot's—registers everywhere in modern English writing. A list of the major works of the period during which modernism was taking shape would include at least these in which Baudelaire is a distinguishing power and an identifying voice: *Poems and Ballads, First and Second Series, The Renaissance, Gaston de Latour, Intentions, The Picture of Dorian Gray, Salomé, The Symbolist Movement in Literature, Heart of Darkness, Rhythm, Blue Review, Wheels, Des Imagistes, Prufrock and Other Observations, The Waste Land, The Sacred Wood, The Problem of Style, Women in Love, Mrs. Dalloway, Point Counter Point*. A list of lesser works of the time, not prominently part of the canon of high modernism, in which his voice is to be heard, is virtually inexhaustible.

Baudelaire is most powerfully present in modern English literature as a suffused and multiply expressive intellectual and imaginative influence, and the sometimes surprising shapes his influence assumes in works of individual writers comprise the subject matter of this book. But his protean presence is by no means confined to the depths, and it does not have its significance only in individual works. It occupies every level of meaning between the profound and the superficial, provokes every tone between the thoughtful and the hysterical, commands every kind of responsive expression from the intensely personal to the wholly public. Baudelaire glitters at the surface of *Sons and Lovers*, for instance, in its elaboration of the motif of "flowers of passion"; he animates the argumentative texture of *Women in Love*, whose passionately derided "flowers of mud" come to represent one side of the novel's sexual conflict; and, with Conrad, he supplies the underlying shape of *Mrs. Dalloway*, the voyage that leads to a vision of "the horror" and to the inclusion, among the flowers Clarissa goes to buy herself, of "flowers of darkness."

Baudelaire's influence in English literature is no less significant when it is conventional than when it is an element in a powerful originality, though in the latter case it has more value. The "flow-

ers" I have just cited suggest not only his particular value to Lawrence and Woolf, but also the existence in the twentieth century of a convention of Baudelaire allusion. Those phrases summon him into activity in those novels just as surely as Eliot's quotation at the end of "The Burial of the Dead" calls him into duty there, and that fact confirms him as a presence in the English tradition as well as in the works of English writers. By the time Lawrence and Woolf wrote, such flowers as they invoked were already rich with the significance of other English contexts, and when they wrote they amplified the already considerable complexity of Baudelaire allusion in English. All of those "flowers" have more than a single root. Lawrence's "flowers of passion" point backward, to Moore's among others; his "flowers of mud" point forward, to the attack on Baudelaire's sexual attitudes in Huxley's most famous novel. And "the horror" and the "flowers of darkness" in *Mrs. Dalloway* initiate a complex series of connections, since *Heart of Darkness*, of which Woolf makes a powerful revision in this novel, is itself a revision of Baudelaire's "Le Voyage," which, by her reference, Woolf invokes. That poem, whose narrative, like Marlow's, is moved forward by the interrupting and prompting questions of the auditors, begins, like his, in excited contemplation of maps and in description of an urgent, childish aspiration to adventure, and it concludes, as does Marlow, having shown experience to be "une oasis d'horreur dans un désert d'ennui." It is Baudelaire's experience, which, in one sense, Marlow lives through. Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*, the product of her creator's powerful seizing, reshaping, and feminizing of a romantic quest which is located precisely in Conrad and Baudelaire,⁴ derives part of her life from him, too. But the communal character of this Baudelaire reference does not stop there. It was, of course, the Conradian "horror" that Eliot intended originally as the epigraph for *The Waste Land*, in which he, too, responds profoundly to Baudelaire's poem. And it was while she was setting the text of *The Waste Land* for the Hogarth Press that Virginia Woolf was hard at work on *The Hours*, as *Mrs. Dalloway* was then called.

By the time the modernists were producing their finest works, then, Baudelaire was solidly canonized, part of a conversation that had become almost wholly English. When Eliot recommended him as the exemplar of modern poetry, Baudelaire was a domesticated influence, an aspect now not chiefly of the re-

lation of English literature to French, but of the English tradition itself. From the moment he was so enthusiastically welcomed by Swinburne, Baudelaire came to English readers and writers as part of their own inheritance—so that Woolf's ambivalent reference includes Conrad's, and Conrad's, as several features of his tale show,⁵ depends on his awareness of the currency of Baudelaire in late nineteenth-century English writing. Similarly, Wilde's Baudelaire includes Pater's, even if secretly; Edith Sitwell's includes Symonds's; and Eliot's includes Swinburne's, even if antagonistically. The appropriation of Baudelaire by the English tradition is part of what I wish to observe in this study; and the Baudelaire who is my subject is not the poet as in himself he really may have been, but, to use Wilde's words, the "complex, multiform," and steadily changing creation of the English writers.

In French accounts of modern literary history, Baudelaire is an ambivalent figure, an emblem both for discontinuity, a radical rejection of the literature of the past, and for a new continuity, the apostolic descent of the moderns. In English literature, from the outset, the ambivalences attached to his name are multiplied, since what in France was simply rejection of the past was in England proposed also as a departure from the national character of the present. Swinburne intended his Baudelaire to be subversive: he proposed him as an antithesis to a confining English tradition, and, from the beginning, for English poets the identification of Baudelaire as a precursor entailed some remarkable exclusions. By every generation of English "moderns" since Swinburne, Baudelaire has been set in opposition to the English line. Making a "brother" of him, Swinburne turned away from "Tennyson & C^{ie}," as he called them in a letter, and so he initiated a process that would conclude in a conception of the development of modern English poetry as the extraordinarily excluding line from Poe to Valéry. The exchange that is at the center of "Ave atque Vale"—in which the poet closes his hand over the "shut scroll" that is *Les Fleurs du Mal*, taking it "as if a hand were in my hand to hold," and offers to the "sweet singing elder brother" his own garland—predicts a wholesale cultural "swerve." This imagery enacts precisely the idea of tradition as a "handing down," as Eliot said it was in "Tradition and the Individual Talent," but it names the members of its "communion of song" with no very great respect for an idea of literature as

the expression of national genius or of literary descent as a branch of national history. Tracking back, by Baudelaire, to Sappho, "the supreme head of song," Swinburne predicts a view of the tradition as "all of the literature of Europe, from Homer."

To defenders of the ancient, national faith and fatherhood, this Baudelaire of Swinburne was grotesque. Robert Buchanan, who is only the most extreme of several early English commentators on Baudelaire and the dangers he represented, saw him as a "Mephistopheles," as a carrier to the island of a new epidemic of "the Italian disease" in literature, and as the "god-father as it were of the modern fleshly school." That language of orthodoxy—of church and state and patriarchy—rings with rhetorical fullness in the English Baudelaire debate, and it is an indication of his usefulness to English poets. His English *semblables* have always used him to establish an idea of their difference. In what Harold Bloom calls the "Eternity of warfare that is poetic influence," Baudelaire represents an idea of alliance, and this is as true of the generation of Eliot as of the generation of Swinburne. When writers of the early twentieth century laid claim to Baudelaire, asserting their likeness to him, they made him in that same gesture serve the purposes of their own renunciations. When John Middleton Murry, for instance, wrote his first essay on Baudelaire, he complained that Wilde, misapprehending his subject completely, had treated the French poets as a "privately printed book of pornography." When Eliot reviewed Symons's translations, he could, he said, "only protest violently." By the end of the second decade of the twentieth century, Baudelaire had been rehabilitated by the newest generation, the subversive had been canonized, and the poet who had scandalized the Victorians was now seen as a profound moralist. But the transmutation of the nineteenth-century "Mephistopheles" into the twentieth-century "'Poet and Saint . . .'" had exclusion as one of its purposes. An account of the transformations in the English myth of Baudelaire comprises a history of relations among generations of English poets.

SWINBURNE

TRADITION AND THE TASTE OF THE
GREATER NUMBER OF READERS

When Swinburne recognized Baudelaire as his elder "brother," he changed the course of the main current of the English tradition, altering in a most unusual way the ideal order against which the individual English talent must define itself. In this history of Baudelaire's affiliation by English poetry, Swinburne has the importance not merely of a beginner, but of a powerful originator. He opened the long conversation with a statement so enduring that when Eliot came to describe *his* Baudelaire, several generations later, it was to Swinburne he turned as antagonist. If Baudelaire is, as Michel Butor says, the pivot around which European poetry turns to become modern, then in England he shares the pivotal place with Swinburne.¹

Swinburne's admiration for Baudelaire has commanded attention since soon after publication of *Poems and Ballads*, in 1866, even though the documents that record it officially constitute a slim file. Swinburne left his review of the poems, his only public speech, "Ave atque Vale," admiring comments in his *Blake* and other critical works, and affectionate and respectful remarks in letters to other people. Baudelaire left only signs of gratitude for Swinburne's review: the inscribed copy of *Richard Wagner et Tannhäuser à Paris* that Swinburne prized, a letter the English poet never received, and references to the review in a letter to his mother and in one to Whistler.² In addition to these bits there is some much-speculated-on information about "messages and courtesies" passed between the two poets by mutual friends ("the admiration of some years," Swinburne said in a note in his *Blake*, "brought me near him by way of written or transmitted word")³

and there are some compelling and much-repeated stories: of Swinburne rising at the Royal Literary Fund Dinner for 1866 to declaim in passionate staccato his admiration for a condemned French poet; of the photographer Nadar, charged with delivering Baudelaire's letter to Swinburne, deciding at the last moment to go to Brussels instead, so that the letter lay in a drawer until after both Swinburne and his "poor Baudelaire" had died;⁴ of Hutton, the editor of *The Spectator*, detecting Swinburne's attempt to slip past him as modern French writers his own inventions Cossu and Clouet ("Or is it Clouët?" he wrote), whose imitations of Baudelaire, as Enid Starkie said, were "scabrous"; of Swinburne, having been misinformed by the papers, starting to compose his most famous elegy before its subject had died.⁵ There is more solid information, and less anecdote, about Swinburne's lifelong admiration for Hugo, which can be examined in their considerable correspondence as well as in Swinburne's fulsome poetic and critical praise of his "beloved Master,"⁶ and even his association with Mallarmé is more amply recorded than that with Baudelaire. Yet it is Swinburne's interest in Baudelaire that continues to fascinate.

That is partly because Swinburne's Baudelaire is one of his major achievements. This has not always seemed true, and the slow shifts of comment on his sympathy with the "sweet strange elder singer"⁷ are illuminating. They trace his own rise and fall on the waves of official criticism at the same time as they sketch the changing shapes of English attitudes toward Baudelaire during the periods in which poetry became "modern." Swinburne's earliest critics, both his friends and his enemies, rushed to see Baudelaire's "influence" as the cause of his "faults." William Michael Rossetti, writing to defend *Poems and Ballads* from the outrage they had provoked, regretted the traces in them of the French "Mephistopheles," and Robert Buchanan, crusading against the "fleshly" poets, made no attempt to restrain his horror about Swinburne's poems, patronizingly attributing their faults to the same source, which he too recognized easily as "Mephistopheles."⁸ The lawyer who represented Buchanan in his 1867 suit against the *Examiner* (a consequence of Swinburne's counterattack) told the court that Swinburne had degraded his poetry "by loading it with a beastly sensualism, and by adopting the indecent garbage of the French Baudelaire," and when Taine

met the poet in 1871 he saw him as “un visionnaire malade” whose poems “sont dans le genre de Baudelaire et de Victor Hugo.”⁹

But Swinburne’s declaration of common cause with Baudelaire came gradually to be seen as evidence of his critical powers. At about the turn of the century, one writer heard “the three names of Baudelaire and Swinburne and Immortality sound as one”; a few years later, another said that Swinburne’s accomplishment had been the introduction into England of “something entirely new” in poetry and “the carrying into perfect practice” of Baudelaire’s theories; and in 1917, the year *Prufrock* saw print, Arthur Symons praised Swinburne lavishly because his early poem “Cleopatra” was “steeped deep in the spirit of Baudelaire.”¹⁰ That same year, Edmund Gosse, recording the major facts about the poets’ association, maintained that Swinburne’s support of Baudelaire required “high intellectual courage,” and the *Mercure de France*, a journal read with respect by the emphatically modern, praised Swinburne’s ability to penetrate the romanticism of *Les Fleurs du Mal*, to detect their chosen, masterly simplicity, to identify what in them is profoundly and broadly classical.¹¹

Swinburne’s admiration for his elder “brother,” however, and especially his claim of consanguinity, drew altogether sharper comment from a younger generation of writers, who wanted to dissociate him, with whom they said they had little in common, from Baudelaire, with whom they considered they shared much. Harold Nicolson, who wrote an eminently anti-Victorian *Life* of Swinburne, told the Royal Society of Literature in 1925 that Swinburne was a mere imitator, that comparison between the two poets showed only that “Baudelaire, for all of his sardonic reticence, was profound,” while “Swinburne, for all his ebullient brilliance, was superficial.” He wrote later that Swinburne was constitutionally incapable of perceiving Baudelaire profoundly: “who could contend,” he demanded, “that [the Pre-Raphaelites and Baudelaire] penetrated to his inner consciousness or created any permanent attitude?”¹² John Middleton Murry and T. S. Eliot joined in denial of Swinburne’s seriousness. Murry saw him as a posturer: “It is as though some Falstaff hit you in the small

un visionnaire . . . a sick visionary whose poems are in the style of Baudelaire and Victor Hugo.

of the back with a flagon of sack and roared: 'I'm a pervert, I am, my old buck!' " Eliot said that Swinburne's view of Baudelaire was "childish," and he resented what he saw as Swinburne's flamboyant appropriation of the French poet: "*Such rugs and jugs and candle lights!*"¹³ By the time Eliot wrote, the pattern of comment on the relationship between the two poets had come full circle and achieved an ironic completeness. Swinburne's elder "brother," having changed by slow degrees from a "Mephistopheles" to a "Poet and Saint," had become the *semblable*, the *frère*, of a new generation; and Swinburne, who had been condemned for his submission to the poet of vice, was now accused of not perceiving Baudelaire's merits, damned for his failure to be influenced *enough*, and blamed for damaging by association the reputation of the poet he had introduced to English readers. In England, Eliot wrote in 1930, it had been Baudelaire's "misfortune to be first and extravagantly advertised by Swinburne."¹⁴

Swinburne, it is true, did much to discourage belief in his seriousness. He told Gosse, for instance, and Gosse repeated these words on every possible occasion, that he had composed his review of *Les Fleurs du Mal*—in which he said that they had the "languid lurid beauty of close and threatening weather"¹⁵—in a Turkish bath in Paris, and at the same time as he was composing his measured critical praise of Baudelaire's "perfect and careful poetry" (*CB*) and subscribing faithfully to the articles of his aesthetic, he was confecting the mock salacity of Cossu and Clouet, parodies that could only, if published, have undercut the praise. But Swinburne was serious, and he was self-aware. Baudelaire was for him the most consequential aspect of an exploration of French literature that served his major poetic purposes. The comments of his critics reflect clearly, though in an oblique mirror, not only relations among generations of English poets but also those between national literatures, and they show a steady shifting of the context in which English poets worked. To Rossetti, Baudelaire's mere Frenchness was exotic; to Murry and Eliot, his exemplary modernity was the first and his nationality only the second fact about him. For them, he was "*notre Baudelaire*," and that fact, though they failed to say so, was brought to birth partly by Swinburne.¹⁶

Like many later poets—Aldington or Sitwell or Pound or Eliot, for instance, who made their search for progenitors a critical theme—Swinburne sought to be influenced, and he said so. He

recorded obligation to Arnold, for instance, "as to all other real and noble artists whose influence it was my fortune to feel when most susceptible of influence, and least conscious of it, and most in want."¹⁷ When, later, he met Baudelaire's work, he was no longer unaware either of what he wanted to express or of the fact that the "taste" and the "tradition" of the time denied him freedom to express it. He made no secret of his regard for Baudelaire as a poet and critic from whom English poets could learn: it is apparent in practically everything he wrote about him, whether for private or public consumption. The clarity of its expression is a measure both of his boldness (the antithesis of Pater's careful removal from *The Renaissance* of phrases that might suggest to a hostile public the presence there of the French master of the "fleshy school") and of his critical self-consciousness, the contrary of the "childish" obliviousness to the "real" for which he was dismissed by his early twentieth-century critics. When he defended his own poems against attack, as well as when he wrote on Blake or Shakespeare or Rossetti, Swinburne "turned to" Baudelaire not merely with respect, but with all "confidence" and "reverence."¹⁸ In Baudelaire, he says more than once, his readers will find, more perfectly expressed than in his own work, precisely what he had himself aimed to say. Swinburne's "turning to" Baudelaire predicts the turning away of the whole of modern English literature from some of the confinements of its own tradition, narrowly defined. For Swinburne, as for Eliot, Baudelaire's achievement did not diminish the possibilities for poetry, but enlarged them. From the beginning, Baudelaire appears in England *as influence*. Swinburne made him available, proposed him as a shaping force.

Dozens of English poets, including some who dismissed Swinburne on the least critical and most patronizing of grounds, were glad to take up his suggestion, and so Baudelaire, who in France had seemed to father symbolism, came eventually, by a process that is one of the subjects of this book, to support English poetry against that school. Swinburne's acknowledgment that he used what he read, however, that he really did learn from it, together with his unusual talent for parody, has from the beginning done great damage to his own reputation. Robert Buchanan pounced on it, and ran up the rough structure of an argument against influence. "Imitation," he said, both in his anonymous review of *Poems and Ballads* and in his damaging "Fleshy School" pieces,

was proof of "insincerity" and "insincerity" a category of "immorality." He presented this argument, he said, on literary grounds; but later, in "The Monkey and the Microscope," he did not hesitate to use it for personal insult:¹⁹

A clever Monkey!—worth a smile!
How really human is his style;
How worthy of our admiration
Is such delicious imitation!

More recently, Swinburne's acknowledgment of influence has been a central point in a claim that he had no serious attitude of his own (no "internal centre," Meredith said)²⁰ and that his work need therefore compel no serious attention. "*Poems and Ballads* were the effervescence with which a quick and shallow nature responded to a certain influence issuing partly from the Greek and Latin classics, partly from medieval legend, partly from the French literature of the nineteenth century," wrote A. E. Housman. Even critics who defend Swinburne's "individuality" have felt obliged to assert it as a paradox, to see him as an original copier. The "Assimilative or Reproductive in point of literary form," said W. M. Rossetti, is "one of the most curious specialties of Mr. Swinburne's writings"; what is remarkable about his poems is that they are "exceedingly fine pieces of work, exceedingly like their adopted models."²¹ Alice Meynell wrote in 1909 that upon Mazzini, Shelley, Gautier, and Baudelaire, Swinburne "sustained, he fattened, he enriched his poetry"; and the introduction to a modern selection of Swinburne's poems perpetuates both the point and the figure: Swinburne's imagination, says Robert Nye, "fed on books, it feasted on other men's wits." It is contrary to our expectations, he says, that "pastiche" should be good poetry, but "in Swinburne it is."²²

The argument about imitation and influence in Swinburne's case was hotly political, on more than one ground. The issue was not, though it claimed to be, whether Swinburne might imitate other writers and still be thought worthy; it was what other writers Swinburne might without offense imitate. As his early, hostile critics saw, Swinburne intended to induce some shifts in the English tradition, and the argument about his imitation was, in its beginnings, a line of defense for his opponents. The question of imitation remained a strain of debate during the whole period in which modernism was taking shape, working out its

history as the international line from Poe to Valéry. It surfaces brilliantly in Wilde, who made it a main preoccupation of his criticism, and who, as the author of a column called "Dinner and Dishes," made the analogy between feeding the imagination and feeding the stomach serve the purposes of critical satire. On the subject of his own imitations, Wilde pleads magnificently guilty, like Bourget insisting that the book is the great initiator,²³ and it is impossible to argue that his imitations were blind. Swinburne's cultivation of influence, however, has often been the subject of facile psychologizing. He is, we are told in the familiar argument, a case of arrested development, a man who, "at a comparatively early age," became "strangely impervious to any new idea or any fresh experience."²⁴ His reading, as a consequence, was a refuge from life, his literary experience necessarily "unreal," the stuff of his poetry merely imitated. His verse, Eliot said (perhaps intending to outrage), is "not morbid," "not erotic," "not destructive": "These are adjectives which can be applied to the material, the human feelings, which in Swinburne's case do not exist."²⁵ Criticism of Swinburne drowns too often in a light wash of psychology; a reductive argument about his life becomes an evasive comment on his work. We are invited to see him as a poet who was almost entirely unselfconscious, or, at most, as one whose self-consciousness was merely technical. He could count, he knew his numbers, but in almost everything else his work was in one way or another the product of the dark dreams of his childhood, mere fantasy. Swinburne's attitude toward Baudelaire, or toward any other writer he admired and learned from, is seen as evidence of his "two dominant and conflicting impulses, namely, the impulse towards revolt and the impulse towards submission."²⁶ From that point of view, poetic influence is submission; the art-for-art's-sake theory is revolt (but submissive because borrowed); and Swinburne's essay in *The Spectator* for 6 September 1862, the first notice in England of *Les Fleurs du Mal*, a principled, perceptive, elegant essay and a new departure in the history of English poetry, can be shrunk to the size of a "piece of daring" intended to thrill its writer and "épater le bourgeois."²⁷ It is sometimes tempting to see criticism of Swinburne's work as the most complete, the ideal gratification of his masochism.

Swinburne's response to Baudelaire, however, is not the outcome of an obscure impulse to submission. It issues from his

critical intelligence, from his frequently parodic self-awareness, and from his faculty for satiric diagnosis. He went to school to the French, and to Baudelaire in particular, for powerful reasons. He found in Baudelaire's criticism a "sane and just" view of the imagination and its rights in relation to society and morality, and in his poetry both a "passionate and stately" music (CB) and a courageous retrieval for poetry of subjects that were thought scandalous in the prudish 'sixties. He saw, furthermore, the possibility of enlarging by alliance the tradition in which English poets wrote. Of course Swinburne intended to confute a too-narrow "tradition and the taste of the greater number of readers" (CB). That is a much more subversive purpose than the mere *épatement des bourgeois*, and it is one on which other writers feasted.

* * *

Exactly when Swinburne first met the "delicate and careful" (CB) work of the poet whose cause he decided to interpret and share remains an attractive mystery. He was still in Oxford in the summer of 1857, a member of the "Old Mortality," enjoying a "considerable ripening of [his] intellectual powers."²⁸ That was the year in which the Obscene Publications Act was passed in England, and, in Paris, the earliest edition of *Les Fleurs du Mal* published, seized, and subjected to what Swinburne, when he reviewed the book four years later, called "a foolish and shameless prosecution." The court that judged Baudelaire's book found it innocent of blasphemy, but guilty of immorality. It fined the poet 300 francs and condemned six of his poems—"Lesbos," "Les Femmes Damnées," "Le Léthé," "A Celle qui est trop gaie," "Les Bijoux," "Les Métamorphoses du Vampire," all of which treat sexual subjects—on the extremely interesting grounds that they "conduisent nécessairement à l'excitation des sens par un réalisme grossier et offensant pour la pudeur."²⁹ (Flaubert, charged on the same counts earlier in the year, got off.) Later, about two hundred copies of *Les Fleurs du Mal* that had escaped confiscation before the trial were mutilated, the offending poems cut out of them, and remaindered, "sans qu'on eût pris la peine d'y coordonner la pagination."³⁰ The second edition, 1861, omit-

conduisent . . . lead necessarily to the excitement of the senses by a realism that is rude and offensive to decency.

sans qu'on . . . without anyone taking the trouble to co-ordinate the pagination.

ted the six offending poems but added thirty-five others (including “Le Voyage”), and the guilty verses, thus separated from the rest, began to lead their own, underground life, turning up first in Brussels in 1866 in an edition intended, according to its acrid advertisement, for the “deux cent soixante lecteurs probables qui figurent—à peu près—. . . le public littéraire en France, depuis que les bêtes y ont décidément usurpé la parole sur les hommes.”³¹ That edition, of which, the advertisement said, the author would become aware at the same time as the two hundred and sixty readers, bore the famous frontispiece by Félicien Rops, an imprint which, intending to confuse pursuit, read “Amsterdam,” and the title *Les Epaves*. These “waifs” or “strays,” as the title denominates them, appeared in several subsequent editions of their own (sometimes in lists of pornographic works), rejoining the rest of Baudelaire’s poems only after his death in the *Oeuvres Complètes* of 1868, although even there they appeared illegally and as a separate section. The court did not reverse its judgment until 1949.

Swinburne’s judgment of *Les Fleurs du Mal*—that it would not “in the long run fail of its meed of admiration whether here or in France”—has not required reversing. His review of the second edition figures in Claude Pichois’s chronology of Baudelaire’s life: “6 septembre [1862]: Dans *The Spectator*, article plein d’admiration de Swinburne sur *Les Fleurs du Mal*” (xlvi), and it is also one of the only two exceptions in Marcel Ruff’s account of the critical blank Baudelaire’s poems met during his lifetime. The other was a series of three articles written by Verlaine, who was then twenty-one, for *L’Art* in November and December of 1865.³² Whenever Swinburne’s first encounter with Baudelaire’s poems took place, his reading of *Les Fleurs du Mal* when he went to Paris in the spring of 1861 was decisive. They had on him, as later on Eliot, “great impact.”³³ He began immediately to keep a scrupulously close watch on Baudelaire’s works as they appeared. His fake review of “Clouet” shows just how close: he attempted to publish it in 1862; it includes information from Baudelaire’s article on Pétrus Borel, which appeared in Paris in

deux cent . . . the probable two hundred and sixty readers who comprise—more or less—the literary public in France, ever since in that country the animals took over speech from men.

6 septembre . . . 6 September [1862]: In *The Spectator*, enthusiastic article by Swinburne on *Les Fleurs du Mal*.

July 1861.³⁴ Later, Swinburne's bookseller had what amounted to a standing order: "And please tell Dulau of Soho Square," he wrote to a friend, "to send me 'Victor Hugo en Zélande'; he will not forget of course (knowing this address) to send the next volume of Baudelaire's works when it appears."³⁵ Swinburne's library, sold in 1916, included the trophies of his steady pursuit: the complete works of 1868, *Les Paradis Artificiels, Opium et Haschisch*, the *Oeuvres Posthumes* of 1887 and 1908, and two copies of *Les Epaves* (1874), as well as two of the earliest critical works, Asselineau's *Baudelaire, Sa Vie et Son Oeuvre* (1869) and Fizelière's and Decaux's bibliography, *Charles Baudelaire* (1868). It also included two of Swinburne's personal treasures. One was the pamphlet *Richard Wagner et Tannhäuser à Paris*, bearing Baudelaire's inscription, in pencil: "Mr. Algernon C. Swinburne Bon souvenir et mille Remerciments, C.B." The other was the copy of the rare first edition of *Les Fleurs du Mal* that William Michael Rossetti had given him in 1864, about which Dante Gabriel Rossetti wrote to Swinburne from Paris: "I tremble for the result of your reading Baudelaire's suppressed poems, the crop of which read I expect you [*sic*] to be in fine flower, not to say fruit, by the time I reach London. If so, and these new revelations are to be printed, too, I warn you that the public will not be able to digest them." (Rossetti concluded his letter with a tantalizing post-script: "Baudelaire is away or I should have met him.")³⁶

Swinburne's response to Baudelaire's work was extraordinary. Between 1861 and 1868, he took full possession of the territory Baudelaire had made available to him. In his criticism, his poems, his remarkable attempts at prose fiction, his satires and parodies, he invented a conversation with his "unbeholden friend" to which he attributed great significance.³⁷ Simple enumeration of the works of his early years in which Baudelaire figures prominently, either explicitly or unnamed, demonstrates the weight he attached to the conversation he was inventing. In his review he marked out the boundaries he would defend, aligning Baudelaire enthusiastically with himself in opposition to nationalistic or moralizing criticism. In *A Year's Letters*, also written in 1861, he dramatized his critical position in the steelily aesthetic Lady Midhurst. Shortly afterward he carried his convictions into

Mr. Algernon . . . Mr. Algernon C. Swinburne Best regards and a thousand Thanks, C.B.

mocking, conspiratorial attack in his reviews of Cossu and Clouet. During these same years he was composing the *Poems and Ballads* of the First Series, elaborating some of the same subject matter that had caused the French court to send *Les Epaves* into exile and that would soon cause Moxon's to withdraw his own book from circulation, and he was working on his intensely Baudelairean second novel, *Lesbia Brandon*. In 1866, he linked himself publicly with Baudelaire by recommending him, in his speech to the Royal Literary Fund Dinner, for the study of English poets, and by invoking his support in what he called "my defensive and offensive pamphlet—*Laus Diabolo*," the *Notes on Poems and Reviews*.³⁸ In 1868 he named Baudelaire as his "brother" in "Ave atque Vale" and called him a "critic of incomparably delicate insight and subtly good sense" in his own major critical work, the study of Blake, which interprets the English poet in terms provided by the French one.³⁹ Baudelaire exerts powerful pressure on the shapes, subjects, and language of all these works. Later, in *Under the Microscope* (1872), Swinburne cited Baudelaire again as authority for his assertion that a poem's moral is none the worse for being implicit; and in his *Study of Shakespeare* (1880) he turned "Not for the first and probably not for the last time . . . with all confidence as with all reverence . . . to the exquisite critical genius of a long honoured and long lamented fellow-craftsman."⁴⁰ For Swinburne, Baudelaire's work was both a central fact and a representative of value. The flower, not to say the fruit, at the thought of which Dante Gabriel Rossetti said he trembled, was chosen.

From the beginning, Swinburne's Baudelaire is a complex construction. Later, sharply opposed views of him would emerge in England—Eliot would see him as a "saint," Yeats as the type of the sensuous man, Murry as an intensely straining moralist, Huxley (after Lawrence) as one of the "grand perverts"—but Swinburne holds a number of those opposing elements together. His careful pointing of the prose in the memorial "notice" he added to his *Blake* emphasizes the balance and opposition of his view:

. . . no more of fervent yet of perfect verse, no more of subtle yet of sensitive comment, will be granted us at the hands of Charles Baudelaire: that now for ever we must fall back upon what is left us. It is precious enough. We may see again as various a power as was his, may feel again as

fiery a sympathy, may hear again as strange a murmur of revelation, as sad a whisper of knowledge, as mysterious a music of emotion; we shall never find so keen, so delicate, so deep an unison of sense and spirit. What verse he could make, how he loved all fair and felt all strange things, with what infallible taste he knew at once the limit and the licence of his art, all may see at a glance.⁴¹

Swinburne's imaginative and critical response to Baudelaire embodies that antithesis and variety. In his official criticism he gives an official portrait, balancing the "courage and good sense" (*CB*) of Baudelaire's aesthetic with the moral weight of his poems, the perfection of the treatment with the appropriateness of the challenging subject matter. That criticism goes together with his memorial poem to make up a passionate and careful "study," as he might have called it. In other pieces, however, those not usually entered seriously into the "Swinburne-Baudelaire" file, he makes Baudelaire part of his fascination with dupery and disguise. This darker, mocking drawing presents an acid, masked criticism of a world in which "les bêtes ont décidément usurpé la parole sur les hommes." Because of circumstances or bad luck—Swinburne did not publish *Lesbia Brandon* in his lifetime and his attempt to hoax *The Spectator* failed—his unofficial portrait of Baudelaire did not see public light. It probably saw a good deal of private light, however: Lafourcade suggests that Swinburne might have sent copies of his Cossu and Clouet to Baudelaire himself, and Gosse reports that he liked nothing better than to read to his friends from *Lesbia Brandon*.⁴² The Baudelaire who emerges from this privately circulated material is an enlightening grotesque, a confirmation of Swinburne's subversive purpose. What is remarkable is that the satiric or secret works go hand in hand with the others: it was while he was working on his serious review of *Les Fleurs du Mal* that Swinburne stitched up and nailed together his Baudelaire parodies and while he worked on his *Blake* that he pieced bits of Baudelaire's criticism and large chunks of his subject matter into *Lesbia Brandon*. Taken together, the two aspects of his Baudelaire suggest both Swinburne's self-consciousness and his full purpose. Both privately and publicly, he made his "brother" serve his own opposition to critical and moral conventions. What the privately circulated material reveals is how far Swinburne did share with Baudelaire's early English

critics a view of the poet as absolutely outside current convention. And while for Robert Buchanan, for instance, that radical difference was horrifying, for Swinburne it was very useful indeed.

The first point in Swinburne's opposition was his internationalism: he diagnosed the cramp Pound was to complain of in London, and, some sixty years before Pound's *New Age* articles prescribed "An Approach to Paris" as the remedy, Swinburne set about achieving it in a many-sided exploration of the literature of "*notre France*," as he called it in a letter to Mallarmé.⁴³ Like Eliot and more than Arnold, he reached easily into French literature for his defining comparisons; like Eliot he used the French tradition to fence with the English. His natural habit of weaving English culture together with French appears not only in his criticism, though abundantly there, but also in every other aspect of his work. He takes sometimes lavish steps, as in the fake epigraph to "*Laus Veneris*," to assert the blood connection between his early poems and a French tradition. His novels are actually attempted as works in English that might have been produced in France; they name French ancestors and address problems posed in French novels. His parodies and satires (*La Fille du Policeman*, *La Soeur de la Reine*, his hoaxing reviews) derive their "humour," as he liked to call it, as well as their bite from the clash of cultural viewpoints, the conflict of national literary conventions. He also was able to ensure that what he wrote on French literature commanded attention in France. Michel Lévy, for instance, hastened to translate and reprint his article on Vacquerie, as having "le double intérêt d'être d'un écrivain illustre et de montrer comment les écrivains français sont appréciés en Angleterre."⁴⁴ Swinburne wrote delightedly to Dante Gabriel Rossetti in 1869 that "The Rappel has reprinted from the *Courier de l'Europe* an excellent version of my article on l'Homme Qui Rit . . . describing the article as 'du à la plume du premier poète actuel de l'Angleterre.' (Pendez-vous MM. Tennyson et C^{ie})"⁴⁵ And Swinburne kept the good opinion of literary Frenchmen: Maupassant wrote a preface to the translation of *Poems and Ballads* of 1891; Francis Vielé-Griffin translated *Laus Veneris* for a separate edition in 1923.⁴⁶ To dismiss Swinburne's

le double . . . the double interest of being by a famous writer and of showing how French writers are appreciated in England.

du à la plume . . . 'from the pen of the greatest living poet in England.' (Hang yourselves, Messers Tennyson and Co!).

interest in French literature as merely "the knowledgeable pose of the English aristocrat" is seriously to miss the point.⁴⁷

When Eliot wrote the most famous essay of his early years, he could without straining credulity say that "the tradition" included "the whole of the literature of Europe." How unlikely that would have seemed when Swinburne wrote his early famous essay on Baudelaire, or when he made his only public speech, is worth remembering. It appears in some of the other speeches at the Royal Literary Fund Dinner at which Swinburne asserted his point about the value of "mutual and reciprocal" influence between France and England.⁴⁸ In the toast to which Swinburne replied, to the "Historical and Imaginative Literature of England," George Stovin Venables indicated how little English literature might require alliance with any other: it had never been excelled or even equalled, he said, and "at this moment," England was one of "only two countries in the world which have any imaginative literature whatever." In Italy, Venables reported, "literature is absolutely dead or asleep. In Spain, literature has been dead for centuries," and in Germany there was not a single poet. The English, he said, should be careful not to take their literature for granted. And while Venables cautioned against complacency, Sir Willoughby Jones, who proposed the toast to the Church of England, reminded his audience of the special connections between the national literature and the national morality. "There is no doubt," he said, "that the tone of English literature is eminently Church of England; and I will venture to say that the plays of Shakespeare are as good sound Church of England books as any in the English language. . . . Why do I say that these plays are sound Church of England books? Because the chief lesson they teach us is this. They hold up to our admiration the four qualities of gentleness, forbearance, moderation and truth; and I believe those four qualities are eminently characteristic of the Church of England." Venables introduced Swinburne as the right person to reply to the toast to English literature, not only because he was "thoroughly imbued with the knowledge and with the traditions of the best school," but also because he had written "a grand English poem." On the very eve of the publication of *Poems and Ballads*, Swinburne was given a heavy charge: "I am sure," Venables said, "that he will feel that as, at present, the representative of the future in English poetry,

he has a great responsibility upon him and a noble task to accomplish."

Swinburne made his major point plainly in his reply. The poets of France and England, he said, drew on a unified tradition. "He who has best praised Shakespeare," he said of Hugo, "is hitherto the sole successor of Shakespeare." Like Eliot later, he asserted the value of "cross-breeding" in poetry,⁴⁹ like him using the horticultural metaphor: "In the imaginative literature of the present day," he said, "I at least can discern no more promising sign than the constant and tenacious influence of England upon France, of France upon England. This mutual and reciprocal influence, valuable as it is and fruitful as it must be, is partially, but is not wholly, a new thing." It was in the context of that unified tradition that he set his estimate of Baudelaire as "one of the most exquisite, most delicate, and most perfect poets of the century—perfect in sound, in colour, in taste of metre, and in tone of emotion" and recommended him, together with Hugo, as an "influence."

Swinburne was certain he shared his belief in the value of "mutual influence" with Baudelaire, who, he said in his speech, "has devoted half his time to the translation and introduction of English writers among the French—not without fruit and not without cost." That is the first claim of his review, which praises Baudelaire's work on English and American writers as evidence of his more than national conception of his art. When Swinburne wrote, in a letter, that he had had "the honour to be coupled with Baudelaire as a fellow labourer,"⁵⁰ he meant not only as a fellow-poet, but also as a fellow-critic whose purpose was to break the national mold, to enable, as Valéry observed in 1924, "*la poésie française [sortir] enfin des frontières de la nation.*"⁵¹ Baudelaire's relationship to Poe was his model: he was certain that the "long, arduous and faithful labour of his brother-poet and translator" was responsible for Poe's fame.⁵² Long afterward he wrote to Mallarmé that his forthcoming study of Blake's poems for the *République des Lettres* "peut-être ne seraient pas sans intérêt pour les poètes français," and that "depuis que nous avons perdu Baudelaire il n'y a que vous qui pourriez dignement

la poésie . . . French poetry finally to go beyond the borders of the nation.
depuis que . . . since we have lost Baudelaire, only you could worthily undertake this glorious task with which I hardly dare entrust myself.

entreprendre cette tâche glorieuse dont j'ose à peine me charger."⁵³ In becoming for some French journals "le premier poète actuel de l'Angleterre" and an authoritative reporter on English views on French writers, Swinburne enacted what he saw as Baudelaire's international vision, reopening the borders long before most modernist writers attempted by conscious (and inherited) cosmopolitanism to escape the confinements of national tradition.

Swinburne's speech to the Royal Literary Fund sharpens to after-dinner directness a point he had already made five years before in his more densely argued review of *Les Fleurs du Mal*. The review, which careless retrospect has often seen as merely a conventional repetition of the slogans of art for art's sake, is measured, reasonable, and penetrating, by far the most important English reaction to Baudelaire in the nineteenth century and the only fully serious one until George Saintsbury's, thirteen years later.⁵⁴ It is also the first statement of the major critical discoveries of Swinburne's career, the genesis of his attempt to track to their sources the "laws" of his art. And it is a significant moment in the history of English criticism, since it heralds three major assertions of modern literature: that the "brotherhood" of poets is international; that poetry and imaginative prose have the right to deal with unorthodox or unusual psychological and sexual subject matter; that the language of criticism stands in need of revision. The review is remarkable for yet another fact: when he wrote it, Swinburne worked, perhaps for the first but certainly not for the last time, with his Baudelaire in front of him. He modelled both his analysis and his praise precisely on what Baudelaire himself had written in his own *Notes Nouvelles Sur Edgar Poe*. (Those *Notes* came to be immensely influential: they provide the critical center of Swinburne's own *Blake* and the foundation of Conrad's "Preface" to *Nigger of the Narcissus*, for instance.) The historical irony in Swinburne's use of them is unavoidable: what Eliot saw as "extravagant" advertisement turns Baudelaire's own criticism to praise of his own poems.

Swinburne opens his review onto a wide perspective, suggesting at the outset that a power of more than national appeal distinguishes the best poetry. He goes on, however, to claim that conditions are no less adverse to poetry in France than in England: there, as here, he says, taking the "thin-spun classical work" of Théodore de Banville as an example, poetry is starved by the

soil in which it attempts to grow, restrained by a wrong-headed and tyrannical criticism. When a poet arises who, unlike Banville, has the power to oppose the restrictions of current critical orthodoxy, that is an event of importance not merely in one country but wherever poetry attempts to flourish. From the beginning, Swinburne joins his art-for-art's-sake arguments to his case for internationalism. When Baudelaire wrote to thank him for the review, of which Swinburne had sent him a copy, he acknowledged the point. Wagner, he said, thanking him for the *Tannhäuser* pamphlet, had told him that he could never have believed that a French poet could so perfectly have understood German music. "N'étant pas exclusivement patriote," Baudelaire wrote, he took that as a compliment. He went on to fold Swinburne into an exclusive company: "Permettez-moi, à mon tour, de vous dire: 'Je n'aurais jamais cru qu'un littérateur anglais pût si bien pénétrer la beauté française, les intentions françaises et la prosodie française.' Mais après la lecture des vers imprimés dans le même numéro . . . et pénétrés d'un sentiment à la fois si réel et si subtil, je n'ai plus été étonné du tout; il n'y a que les poètes pour bien comprendre les poètes."⁵⁵

Swinburne's review makes Baudelaire's criticism central, attributing the perfection of his poetry to the rightness and rigor of his critical conception: Baudelaire's first publications, his essays on art, show "such admirable judgment, vigour of thought and style, and appreciative devotion to the subject, that the worth of his own future work in art might have been foretold even then." Of course, Baudelaire's *Notes* give just such a prominence to Poe's critical views. In America, he says, exploiting the international comparison, there are plenty of "pédants qui valent bien les nôtres pour rappeler sans cesse l'artiste à la beauté antique, pour questionner un poète ou un romancier sur la moralité de son but et la qualité de ses intentions" (II, 320). Poe's distinction,

N'étant . . . Not being exclusively patriotic myself.

Permettez-moi . . . Allow me, in turn, to say to you: 'I would never have believed that an English man of letters could so clearly understand French beauty, French intentions and French prosody.' But after reading the poetry printed in the same number . . . expressing feelings at once so real and so subtle, I was no longer at all surprised; only poets can properly understand poets.

pédants . . . pedants at least the equal of our own at ceaselessly calling artists back to antique beauty, at cross-questioning a poet or a novelist on the morality of his aims and the quality of his intentions (C, 189-90).

however—"Car il ne fut jamais dupe!" (II, 321)—was to have refused to subscribe to error:

Un semblable milieu social engendre nécessairement des erreurs littéraires correspondantes. C'est contre ces erreurs que Poe a réagi aussi souvent qu'il a pu et de toute sa force. Nous ne devons donc pas nous étonner que les écrivains américains, tout en reconnaissant sa puissance singulière comme poète et comme conteur, aient toujours voulu infirmer sa valeur comme critique. Dans un pays où l'idée de l'utilité, la plus hostile du monde à l'idée de beauté, prime et domine toute chose, le parfait critique sera le plus *honorable*, c'est-à-dire celui dont les tendances et les désirs se rapprocheront le plus des tendances et des désirs de son public . . . celui qui cherchera dans un livre de poésie les moyens de perfectionner la conscience. Naturellement, il deviendra d'autant moins soucieux des beautés réelles, positives, de la poésie; il sera d'autant moins choqué des imperfections et même des fautes dans l'exécution. (II, 328)

That paragraph provides the design for Swinburne:

French poetry of the present date, taken at its highest, is not less effectually hampered by tradition and the taste of the greater number of readers than our own is. A French poet is expected to believe in philanthropy, and break off on occasion in the middle of his proper work to lend a shove forward to some theory of progress. The critical students there, as well as here, judging by the books they praise and the advice they proffer, seem to have pretty well forgotten

Car il . . . For dupe he never was! (C, 191).

Un semblable . . . A social environment of this order is bound to produce corresponding literary errors. It is these errors that Poe battled against, as often as he could, and with all his might. We must therefore be in no way surprised that American writers, whilst recognizing his remarkable power as poet and storyteller, have always tended to challenge his value as a critic. In a country where the utilitarian idea, the most hostile in the world to the idea of beauty, takes first place and dominates all other considerations, the perfect critic will be the most 'respectable,' that is to say, the critic whose instinctive attitudes and desires will come closest to the attitudes and desires of his readers; the one who, confusing faculties and types of production, will ascribe to them all one single purpose; the one who will seek in a book of poetry a means of perfecting the conscience. Naturally he will, to that extent, become less attentive to the real positive beauties of poetry; he will, to that extent, be less shocked by the blemishes and even the vices of form (C, 198).

that a poet's business is presumably to write good verses, and by no means to redeem the age and remould society. No other form of art is so pestered with this impotent appetite for meddling in quite extraneous matters; but the mass of readers seem actually to think that a poem is the better for containing a moral lesson or assisting in a tangible and material good work. The courage and sense of a man who at such a time ventures to profess and act on the conviction that the art of poetry has absolutely nothing to do with didactic matter at all, are proof enough of the wise and serious manner in which he is likely to handle the materials of his art. From a critic who has put forward the sane and just view of this matter with a consistent eloquence, one may well expect to get as perfect and careful poetry as he can give.

Yet despite the "hérésie de l'enseignement" and although "aucun poème ne sera si grand, si noble, si véritablement digne du nom du poème, que celui qui aura été écrit uniquement pour le plaisir d'écrire un poème" (II, 333), neither Baudelaire nor Swinburne proposes criticism for criticism's sake. Each makes the art-for-art's-sake arguments serve the purposes of social criticism, and each presents his heroic proponent of aesthetic independence (Poe for Baudelaire, Baudelaire for Swinburne) as a social critic, in pitched opposition to positions derived from what Baudelaire detested as the philosophy of progress. Baudelaire saw Poe's social mockery and his critical brilliance as vitally connected: he is great in his metaphysical subtlety, in the beauty of his conceptions and in the rigor of his analysis; but he is no less great in his quality as *caricature*, *jongleur*, *farceur* (II, 321). Swinburne's Blake demonstrates the connection, too, in, for instance, what seems almost like "a scrap saved from some tattered chorus of Aristophanes, or caught up by Rabelais as the fragment of a litany at the shrine of the *Dive Bouteille*."⁵⁶

To the charge that Baudelaire's poems were immoral, then, Swinburne replied firmly that they were well made: while the

hérésie . . . the heresy of didacticism (C, 203).

aucun poème . . . no poem will be as great, as noble, so truly worthy of the name 'poem' as the one written for no purpose other than the pleasure of writing a poem (C, 203).

caricature . . . caricature, trickster, joker.

answer baffled some of his readers, he saw it as a refusal, like Poe's, to subscribe to error. Aiming to shift aesthetic judgment from subject to treatment, he offers Baudelaire's least conventional subjects for approval on grounds of their art. Of "Une Charogne," here introduced to English readers, he writes: "Thus, even of the loathsomest bodily putrescence and decay he can make some noble use; pluck out its meaning and secret, even its beauty, in a certain way, from actual carrion." Of "Les Litanies de Satan," he says: "it is one of the noblest lyrics ever written," "every verse has the vibration in it of naturally sound and pure metal." He presses the case for the formal perfection of Baudelaire's work: his "mastery of the sonnet-form," he writes, "is worth remarking as a test of his natural bias towards such forms of verse as are most nearly capable of perfection"; and it is his "supreme excellence of words" that enables him to "grapple with and fitly render the effects of such material." That sharp separation of "mere material," as Pater would call it in his "Giorgione" essay, and art (a separation that is far more extremely expressed in Eliot's remark about "the material, the human feelings, which in Swinburne's case do not exist") aims to protect poetry from moralizing zeal, of course, but it also initiates a revision of critical language. Having put poetry beyond the reach of non-aesthetic criticism by making judgment of its subject matter "extraneous," Swinburne pushes his "aesthetic" position still further (preceding Pater's *anders-streben* in the process) and commends Baudelaire's poems for the forces they borrow from the other arts. He calls *Les Fleurs du Mal* a "complicated tune of poems" and admires its painterly qualities: its "quality of *drawing* . . . recalls the exquisite power . . . of great French artists now living. His studies are admirable for truth and grace; his figure-painting has the ease and strength, the trained skill, and beautiful gentle justice of manner, which come out in such pictures as the *Source* of Ingres, or that other splendid study by Flandrin, of a curled-up naked figure under full soft hot light, now exhibiting here." (The tone of the *salon* is not out of place in this review; and the "quality of drawing" is relevant to the striking "study" that opens *Lesbia Brandon*.) Swinburne turns Baudelaire's poetry into a landscape-painting of his own—it has "thick shadow of cloud about it, and fire of molten light"—and he uses the same terms to insist on subordinating its morality to its art. The "moral side of the book is not thrust forward in the foolish and repulsive manner of a

half-taught artist," he says, "the background, as we called it, is not out of drawing."

Those grounds for the evaluation of poetry, which by their assertion of dramatic distance between artist and subject open an argument that would emerge in 1919 as the "impersonality" theory, would not of course have dismayed Pound, who saw form as "the test of a man's sincerity" and wrote that while Keats had got so far as to see that poetry "need not be the pack-mule of philosophy," Swinburne had "recognized poetry as an art"; but they did trouble the editor of *The Spectator*, who wrote to Swinburne that he found his ideas "a little unintelligible." "What is Poetry and Art?" he asked. "Are they all 'flowers'? Are they all to be judged by smell and sight? . . . You write as if Art and Poetry consisted of pictorial qualities. Can you hold to anything so narrow?"⁵⁷ The answer to the question was no, as Hutton really should have known from Swinburne's discussion of the morality of *Les Fleurs du Mal*, but the aesthetic Swinburne was adopting—and so laying down in print for the first time in English some of the basic positions of modernism—made the formal quality of a work its justification, the proper center of attention for both poet and critic. Poe, Baudelaire had written in his *Notes Nouvelles*,

était avant tout sensible à la perfection du plan et à la correction de l'exécution; démontant les oeuvres littéraires comme des pièces mécaniques défectueuses (pour le but qu'elles voulaient atteindre), notant soigneusement les vices de fabrication; et quand il passait au détail de l'oeuvre, à son expression plastique, au style en un mot, épiluchant, sans omission, les fautes de prosodie, les erreurs grammaticales et toute cette masse de scories, qui, chez les écrivains non artistes, souillent les meilleures intentions et déforment les conceptions les plus nobles. (II, 328)

était avant . . . Above all, he was sensitive to the degree of perfection in the structure, and to formal correction. He would take literary works to pieces like a defective mechanism (defective, that is, in relation to its avowed aims), noting carefully the faults in manufacture; and, when he came to examine a work in detail, in its plastic form or, in a word, its style, he would, without omitting anything, sift the errors of prosody, the grammatical mistakes, and all that mass of surface scum which, in writers who are not artists, spoils the best intentions and distorts the most noble conceptions (C, 198-99).

Description of poetry in the language of painting was already a familiar characteristic of Baudelaire's criticism by the time he compared Poe to Delacroix, finding poetry in the painting and color in the prose. When Swinburne writes of Baudelaire's poems that the background is not out of drawing, he recalls specifically what the French poet had written about the American: in Poe's tales, "les fonds et les accessoires y sont appropriés au sentiment des personnages" (II, 317). For Swinburne, as for Baudelaire before and Pater after, the comparisons of the arts—or, rather, the critical transpositions—and the conceit of the *anders-streben* seemed, paradoxically, to emphasize what in poetry was poetry and "not another thing."⁵⁸ The painting analogy in Swinburne, like the idea of abstraction in Pater, displaces value from subject to treatment. Like James and after Baudelaire, Swinburne insists that the poet must have his *donnés*: "The main charm of the book is, upon the whole, that nothing is wrongly given, nothing capable of being re-written or improved on its own ground. Concede the starting point and you cannot have a better runner." That argument is part of Swinburne's program for realliance: only poets can understand poets (soon Eliot would say that only poets can understand poetry) and only the language of the arts is appropriate to describe an art. This of course gives English poets more in common with French poets than with some English readers, and poetry more in common with painting than with philosophy. Swinburne was launching an offensive on the language of criticism. The following passage from his *Blake*, which has sometimes drawn the attention of critics for the borrowed synaesthesia of its conclusion, is most interesting for the problem it sets as a frame for the borrowing:⁵⁹

There is something too rough and hard, too faint and formless, in any critical language yet devised, to pay tribute with the proper grace and sufficiency to the best works of the lyrical art. One can say, indeed, that some of these earliest songs of Blake's have the scent and sound of Elizabethan times upon them . . . but when we have to drop comparison and cease looking back or forward for verses to match with these, we shall hardly find words to suit our sense of their beauty. . . . They have a fragrance of sound, a melody of

les fonds . . . The backgrounds and the accessories are always appropriate to the feelings of the characters (C, 186).

colour, in a time when the best verses produced had merely the arid perfume of powder, the twang of dry wood, and adjusted strings; when here the painting was laid on in patches, and there the music meted out by precedent; colour and sound never mixed together into the perfect scheme of poetry.

Swinburne offers those lateral steps across the boundaries of the arts as a revision to critical language: that is part of his first lesson from Baudelaire.

Swinburne's article on *Les Fleurs de Mal* takes a moderate view of their morality. He would advance his art-for-art's-sake arguments with more of the spirit of battle in his *Blake*, but even there he has none of the extremeness of Gautier, for whom "Rien de ce qui est beau n'est indispensable à la vie" and, conversely, "En général, dès qu'une chose devient utile, elle cesse d'être belle."⁶⁰ Indeed in his *Blake* Swinburne contradicts that view directly, maintaining that "if the art of verse is not indispensable and indestructible, the sooner it is put out of the way the better."⁶¹ His Baudelaire review aims at balance on the moral question: "There is not one of these poems that could have been written in a time when it was not the fashion to dig for moral motives and conscious reasons," he says, or "which has not a distinct and vivid background of morality to it." He does not argue that the poems are without moral effect, only that their morality is a quality of the art and not of the material, a consequence of execution rather than didactic intention. "If any reader could extract from any poem a positive spiritual medicine," he writes, "if he could swallow a sonnet like a moral prescription—then clearly the poet supplying these intellectual drugs would be a bad artist; indeed, no real artist, but a huckster and vendor of miscellaneous wares. But those who will look for them may find moralities in plenty behind every poem of M. Baudelaire's." That balanced position, basic both to Swinburne's reading of *Les Fleurs du Mal* and to his own work, takes him some distance from Gautier, for whom even such a whiff of utility was too strong, but it reflects precisely Swinburne's source, in which the follow-

Rien de . . . Nothing that is beautiful is indispensable to life.

En général . . . In general, as soon as a thing becomes useful it ceases to be beautiful.

ing lines succeed directly the passage on the *hérésie de l'enseignement* to which Swinburne refers in his *Blake*:

Je ne veux pas dire que la poésie n'ennoblisse pas les mœurs,—qu'on me comprenne bien,—que son résultat final ne soit pas d'élever l'homme au-dessus du niveau des intérêts vulgaires; ce serait évidemment une absurdité. Je dis que si le poète a poursuivi un but moral, il a diminué sa force poétique; et il n'est pas imprudent de parier que son oeuvre sera mauvaise. La poésie ne peut pas, sous peine de mort ou de défaillance, s'assimiler à la science ou à la morale; elle n'a pas la Vérité pour objet, elle n'a qu'Elle-même. Les modes de démonstration de vérité sont autres et sont ailleurs. La Vérité n'a rien à faire avec les chansons. (II, 333)

Swinburne had those *Notes* very much in mind when he wrote in his *Blake* that the "contingent result" of good art and noble writing was "that the spirit and mind of men then living will receive on some points a certain exaltation and insight," and he had still not forgotten them when he said in his *Study of Shakespeare* that "A discovery of some importance has recently been proclaimed as with blare of vociferous trumpets and flutter of triumphal flags; no less a discovery than this—that a singer must be tested by his song."⁶²

It is not for its attempt at balance in an argument about morality and the independence of poetry that Swinburne's review of Baudelaire is usually remembered, however, but for its presentation of the "perfect artist" as the type of the decadent poet. The poet has, Swinburne writes, a natural attraction to "sad and strange things—the weariness of pain and the bitterness of pleasure—the perverse happiness and wayward sorrows of exceptional people." He is drawn "Not [to] the luxuries of pleasure in their first simple form, but [to] the sharp and cruel enjoyments of pain, the acrid relish of suffering felt or inflicted, the sides

Je ne veux . . . Let there be no misunderstanding: I do not mean to say that poetry does not ennoble manners—that its final result is not to raise man above the level of squalid interests; that would clearly be absurd. What I am saying is that, if the poet has pursued a moral aim, he will have diminished his poetic power; nor will it be incautious to bet that his work is bad. Poetry cannot, except at the price of death or decay, assume the mantle of science or morality; the pursuit of truth is not its aim, it has nothing outside itself. The modes of demonstration of truth are other, and elsewhere. Truth has nothing to do with song (C, 204).

on which nature looks unnatural." Swinburne sees in "Une Martyre" the "hideous violence wrought by a shameless and senseless love" and a "poetry of strange disease and sin" clothed in "glorious style and decorative language." The poems, he writes, have "altogether a feline style of beauty—subtle, luxurious, with sheathed claws"; their style is "sensuous and weighty; the sights seen are steeped most often in sad light and sullen colour." The "Litanies de Satan" are the book's "key-note" because "here it seems as if all failure and sorrow on earth, and all the cast-out things of the world—ruined bodies and souls diseased—made their appeal; in default of help, to Him in whom all sorrow and all failure were incarnate."

That description supplies Swinburne with direction for his own poetry and prose—it is his examination of the very subject matter he defends in *Notes on Poems and Reviews*—and it also provides a pattern for English descriptions of Baudelaire's work. Trimmed from the context of Swinburne's argument, the description could be knit without seam into Gautier's 1868 preface to *Les Fleurs du Mal*, since there, too, the poems are offered as the product of "the last hours of civilization" and made to exemplify a theory of literary decadence. Swinburne's later readers would find in his review, as in Gautier's preface, a source for the sensational and conventional "baudelairism" against which still later readers would rebel. There is historical irony in that sequence, too, however, since Swinburne's description of the decadent poet, like Gautier's preface, is again drawing specifically on what Baudelaire had written on Poe. The *Notes Nouvelles*, to which Swinburne is so widely indebted, both in the review and in the *Blake*, opens with an acid defense of "*Littérature de décadence!*" In the dying agonies of the setting sun, Baudelaire says, "certains esprits poétiques" can find new delights. Poe is one such, a nervous, perverse poet ("*Genus irritabile vatum!*"), whose poems, as Baudelaire had noted in his first study of him, focus on sick or diseased subjects. They have "des fonds violâtres et verdâtres où se révèlent la phosphorescence de la pourriture et la senteur de l'orage"; they show women "toutes lumineuses

certains . . . some poetic minds.

des fonds . . . lurid backgrounds of mingled purple and green, which reveal the phosphorescence of decay and the smell of the storm.

toutes . . . bathed in light, feverish, dying of mysterious maladies.

et malades, mourant de maux bizarres"; they present "l'amour du grotesque . . . l'amour de l'horrible" (II, 317-18). Most importantly, Baudelaire writes, "nous noterons que cet auteur, produit d'un siècle infatué de lui-même, enfant d'une nation plus infatuée d'elle-même qu'aucune autre, a vu clairement, a imperturbablement affirmé la méchanceté naturelle de l'Homme" (II, 322). That perception lies behind Poe's psychology, as Baudelaire sees it, and it probably also prompts Swinburne's identification of "Les Litanies de Satan" as the "key-note" of the *Fleurs*. What Poe saw, and what pits him against the facile optimism of his time and his place, is that there is in man

une force mystérieuse dont la philosophie moderne ne veut pas tenir compte; et cependant, sans cette force innommée, sans ce penchant primordial, une foule d'actions humaines resteront inexplicables, inexplicables. Ces actions n'ont d'attrait que *parce que* elles sont mauvaises, dangereuses; elles possèdent l'attrance du gouffre. Cette force primitive, irrésistible, est la Perversité naturelle, qui fait que l'homme est sans cesse et à la fois homicide et suicide, assassin et bourreau;—car, ajoute-t-il, avec une subtilité remarquablement satanique, l'impossibilité de trouver un motif raisonnable suffisant pour certaines actions mauvaises et périlleuses, pourrait nous conduire à les considérer comme le résultat des suggestions du Diable. . . . (II, 322-23)

For Baudelaire, Poe and the idea of decadence constituted a strong antithesis to the philosophy of progress. The language of Swinburne's description of *Les Fleurs du Mal* makes all the

l'amour . . . the love of the grotesque . . . the love of the horrible (C, 186-87).
nous noterons . . . let us take careful note that this author, the product of a self-infatuated age, the child of a nation more full of its own importance than any other, has seen clearly, has calmly proclaimed the natural wickedness of man (C, 192).

une force . . . a mysterious force that modern philosophy refuses to take into account; and yet without this unmentioned force, without this primeval tendency, a vast number of human actions will remain unexplained, inexplicable. These actions exercise a pull only because they are bad, dangerous; they have the lure of the abyss. This primitive, irresistible force is the natural perversity that results in man's being constantly, and at one and the same time, homicidal and suicidal, murderer and executioner; for, he adds, with a remarkably satanic subtlety, in the absence of an adequate, reasonable motive to account for certain evil and dangerous actions, we might be led to put them down to the promptings of the Devil . . . (C, 192).