

BAUDELAIRE: INTRODUCTION AND PROSE POEMS

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XXIX: THE GENEROUS GAMBLER

Charles Baudelaire
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Yesterday, through the crowd of the boulevard, I felt myself grazed by a mysterious Being whom I had always desired to know, and whom I recognized at once, though I had never seen him. There was undoubtedly an analogous desire relative to me within him, for he gave me, in passing, a significant wink of the eye, which I hastened to obey. I followed him attentively, and soon I descended behind him into a subterranean dwelling, dazzling, from which burst a luxury of which none of the superior habitations of Paris could provide an example anywhere close. It seemed strange to me that I had been able to pass so often alongside this prestigious lair without guessing its entrance. There reigned an exquisite, though heady, atmosphere, which made one forget almost instantly all the tedious horrors of life; there one breathed a dark bliss, analogous to that which was felt by the lotus-eaters when, landing on an enchanted island, illuminated by the gleams of an eternal afternoon, they felt born within them, with the drowsiness of the melodious cascades, the desire never to see again their penates, their wives, their children, and to never go back on the tall billows of the sea.

There were strange faces of men and women, marked with a fatal beauty, which it seemed I had already seen in eras and in countries which it was impossible for me to remember exactly, and who inspired in me a fraternal sympathy rather than that fear

which ordinarily springs from the appearance of the unknown. If I wanted to try and define in any way the singular expression of their gaze, I would say that I never saw eyes shining more energetically with the horror of boredom and with the immortal desire to feel themselves alive.

My host and I were already, in sitting down, old and perfect friends. We ate, we drank immoderately all sorts of extraordinary wines, and, something no less extraordinary, it seemed to me that, after several hours, I was no more drunk than he. However, gambling, that superhuman pleasure, had cut off our frequent libations at various intervals, and I must say that I had played and lost my soul, in part bound, with heroic heedlessness and levity. The soul is a thing so impalpable, so often useless and sometimes so embarrassing, that I felt, with regard to this loss, only a little less emotion than if, on a walk, I had misplaced my calling card.

We smoked for a long time some cigars whose incomparable flavor and perfume gave the soul a longing for unknown countries and unknown happiness, and, intoxicated with all these delights, I dared, in an outburst of familiarity which did not seem to displease him, to cry out, grabbing hold of a cup full to the brim: "To your immortal health, you old goat!"

We also talked of the universe, of its creation and of its future destruction; of the great idea of the age, that is to say, of progress and perfectibility, and, in general, of all forms of human infatuation. On this subject, His Highness never ran out of light and irrefutable jokes, and he expressed himself with a smoothness of diction and a calmness in humour which I have not found in any of the most famous talkers of humanity. He explained to me the absurdity of the different philosophies which up to now had taken possession of the human brain, and even deigned to confide in me some fundamental principles of which it does not suit me to share the profit and possession with anyone . . . He did not complain in any way of the bad reputation he enjoyed in all parts of the world, assured me that he himself was the person most interested in the destruction of superstition, and swore to me that he had only ever been afraid, relative to his own power, one single time, it was the day he heard a preacher, more subtle than his

colleagues, cry out in the pulpit: “My dear brethren, never forget, when you hear the progress of the Enlightenment extolled, that the devil’s finest trick is to persuade you he does not exist!”

The memory of that famous orator led us naturally to the subject of the academies, and my strange company affirmed to me that he did not disdain, in many cases, to inspire the pen, the word and the conscience of pedagogues, and that he was almost always present in person, though invisible, at all academic sessions.

Encouraged by so much kindness, I asked him for news of God, and if he had seen him recently. He replied, with a heedlessness shaded with a certain sadness: “We greet each other when we meet, but as two old gentlemen in whom an innate politeness cannot completely extinguish the memory of old grudges.”

It is doubtful that His Highness had ever given such a long audience to a mere mortal, and I was afraid of taking advantage. Finally, as the shivering dawn whitened the windowpanes, this celebrated character, sung by so many poets and served by so many philosophers who work for his glory without knowing it, said: “I want you to keep a good memory of me, and to prove to you that I, of whom so much evil is said, am sometimes a *good devil*, to use one of your vulgar locutions. In order to make up for the irremediable loss you have made of your soul, I give to you the stake you would have won if fate had been on your side, that is to say the possibility of relieving and conquering, throughout your life, that strange affection of boredom, which is the source of all your diseases and all your miserable progress. Never will you form a desire without me helping you realize it; you will reign over your vulgar peers; you will be supplied with flattery and even adoration; silver, gold, diamonds, fairy palaces, will come seek you out and beg you to accept them, without your having made an effort to win them; you will change region and fatherland as often as your fancy dictates; you will gorge yourself on voluptuous pleasure, without fatigue, in charming lands where it is always warm and where the women smell as good as flowers—and so on, and so on . . .” he added, getting up and dismissing me with a good-natured smile.

If it had not been for the fear of humiliating myself before such a large assembly, I would have fallen willingly at the feet of this generous gambler, to thank him for his unprecedented munificence. But little by little, after I had left him, incurable distrust returned to my bosom; I no longer dared believe in so prodigious a happiness, and, as I was going to bed, still saying my prayers through a residue of idiotic habit, I repeated while half-asleep: "My God! Lord, my God! Make the devil keep his word!"

XLVII. MADEMOISELLE BISTOURY

Charles Baudelaire

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As I arrived at the far end of the suburb, under the flash of the gas lights, I felt an arm slip gently under mine, and I heard a voice that spoke in my ear: "Are you a doctor, sir?"

I looked; she was a tall, sturdy girl, with wide open eyes and lightly made up, her hair floating in the wind with the straps of her bonnet.

"No; I am not a doctor. Let me go."

"Oh yes! you are a doctor. I can see it well. Come to my place. You'll be very happy with me, come on!"

"No doubt, I will go and see you, but later, *after the doctor*, what the hell! . . ."

"Ah! ah!" she said, still hanging on my arm, and bursting with laughter, "you are a funny doctor; I have known many of that type. Come."

I passionately love mystery, because I always have the hope of untangling it. I let myself be carried off by that companion, or rather this unexpected enigma.

I omit the description of the hovel; you can find it in several well-known old French poets. Only, a detail unnoticed by Ragner, two or three portraits of famous doctors were hanging on the walls.

How I was pampered! Large fire, mulled wine, cigars; and, while offering me these good things, and lighting a cigar herself, the silly creature would say to me, "Make yourself at home, my friend, make yourself comfortable. It will remind you of the hospital and the good times of your youth.—Oh my! where did you get this white hair? You were not that way, not so long ago, when you were L's intern . . . I remember it was you who assisted him with the serious operations. Now there was a man who loved to cut, prune and trim! It was you who handed him the instruments, the threads and the sponges. And when, the operation done, he said proudly, looking at his watch: 'Five minutes, gentlemen!'—Oh! I get around. I know these gentlemen well."

A few moments later, addressing me with the familiar *tu*, she resumed her antiphon and said to me: "You're a doctor, aren't you, my kitten?"

This unintelligible refrain made me jump to my feet.

"No!" I shouted furiously.

"Surgeon, then?"

"No! no! unless it's to cut off your head! S . . . s . . . c . . . of s . . . m . . . !"

"Wait," she said, "you'll see."

And she drew from a cupboard a bundle of papers, which was nothing but a collection of portraits of the illustrious physicians of that time, lithographed by Maurin, which has been seen spread over the Quay Voltaire for several years.

"So! Do you recognize this one?"

"Yes! it is X. The name is at the bottom anyway; but I know him personally."

"I knew you did! Look! Here is Z, the one who said in his lecture, speaking of X. 'This monster who carries on his face the blackness of his soul!' All this because the other was not of his opinion in the same case! How we laughed at that in school, at the time! You remember it? Look, here is K., the one who denounced to the government the insurgents he treated at his hospital. It was the time of the riots. How is it possible that such a handsome man could have so little heart? Here now is W., a famous English physician; I caught him on his trip to Paris. He has the look of a young lady, does he not?"

And as I touched a bundle tied up, also laid on the pedestal table, “Wait just a bit,” she said; “That’s the interns, and this package is the externs.”

And she spread out a mass of photographic images in a fan, representing much younger features.

“When we meet again, you will give me your portrait, won’t you, my darling?”

“But,” I said to her, following in my turn, me too, my obsession “Why do you believe I am a doctor?”

“Because you are so kind and good to women!”

“Strange logic!” I said to myself.

“Oh! I am hardly ever mistaken; I have known a good number. I love these gentlemen so much that, although I am not ill, I sometimes go see them for no other reason than to see them. There are some who tell me coldly: “You are not sick at all!” But there are others who understand me because I play a part for them.”

“And when they do not understand you . . . ?”

“Great Mary! As I have bothered them *unnecessarily*, I leave ten francs on the mantel. They’re so good and sweet, these men!—At Pitié Hospital I discovered a little intern, who is pretty as an angel, and who is polite! And who works hard, poor boy! His comrades told me he did not have money because his parents were poor and could not send him anything. It gave me confidence. After all, I’m a beautiful enough woman, though not so young. I said, ‘Come see me, come see me often. And with me, do not worry; I do not need money.’ But you understand that I let him know that in a host of ways; I did not tell him so crudely; I was so afraid of humiliating him, the dear child!—Well! would you believe that I have a funny desire that I dare not tell him?—I would like him to come and see me with his kit and apron, even with a little blood on it!”

She said that with an extremely candid look, as a sensitive man would say to an actress whom he loves: “I want to see you dressed in the costume you wore in that famous role you created.”

As for me, I persisted, I continued: “Can you remember the time and occasion when this so particular passion was born within you?”

With difficulty I made myself understood; finally I succeeded. But then she answered with a very sad look, and even, as far as I can remember, turning her eyes away: “I do not know . . . I do not remember.”

What bizarre things can you not find in a big city, when you know to go about and look? Life teems with innocent monsters.—Lord my God! you, the Creator, you, the Master; you who have made Law and Freedom; you, the sovereign who lets be, the judge who pardons; you who are full of motives and causes, and who may have put in my mind this taste of horror to convert my heart, like healing at the end of a blade; Lord have mercy, have pity on madmen and fools! O Creator! Can there be monsters in the eyes of Him alone who knows why they exist, how they were made and how they might not have been made?

BAUDELAIRE AND CHRISTIANITY: AN INTRODUCTION

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NOTE: The following is intended as a supplement the above translations and to explain why readers of a theology journal might be interested in them and other works by Charles Baudelaire.

One might wonder why Christians in particular should be interested in a poet with such a reputation for Satanism and blasphemy, not to mention flagrant sexual immorality and conspicuous drug and alcohol abuse. Not only that, but his body of work often revels in the most disgusting imagery: spiders, whores, skeletons, vampires, worms, corpses, wounds, and disease. No wonder he has been detested and denounced by many Christians, both in his own lifetime and beyond. As Freeman Henry says:

The outcries of moral indecency, of irreverence, and of sacrilege followed swiftly the appearance of *Les Fleurs du Mal* in 1857 and culminated in the now-famous trial before the magistrates of Napoleon III's Sixth Correctional Chamber. The small fine and partial censure of the work (300 francs and six poems condemned) imposed by the court did not reflect, however, the outrage expressed by many religiously conservative readers. The friend and confessor of the poet's mother, abbe Cardinne, went so far as to burn the book, claiming it to be diabolical; and one of Baudelaire's staunchest supporters, Barbey d'Aurevilly, wrote that the poet of this strange volume of verse had but two options before him: either to commit suicide or to convert to Christianity.¹

Nevertheless, Baudelaire's work has also found champions among many Christians, including writers such as François Mauriac, T. S. Eliot and Dana Gioia.² His poetry is suffused with Christian imagery, and frequently addresses serious theological issues. Furthermore, it should not be a surprise that Baudelaire eventually *did* have a sincere religious conversion to Catholic Christianity later in life, well before his death bed.³ Still, the main body of his work, most of which was composed well before that conversion, does pose a challenge for many Christian readers.

Through the most of his adult life Baudelaire might fairly be described as Catholic without quite being Christian. While many who have defied Christian morality as he did in life have tended to an optimistic view of human nature, Baudelaire was not one of them. It is commonly said that, while Baudelaire did not believe

1. Henry, "Onomastics," 44. For a survey of the critical reactions to Baudelaire, positive and negative, up to 1917, see Carter, "Baudelaire devant la critique de 1857 à 1917." François Mauriac ("Charles Baudelaire the Catholic," 36) claimed that the priests who educated young men in France while he (Mauriac) was growing up excluded Baudelaire and Verlaine from their curriculum, even though they included secular authors such as Flaubert.

2. Eliot, "Baudelaire," 335–45; Gioia, "Conversation," 76, 79; Mauriac, "Charles Baudelaire the Catholic," 30–37.

3. The most substantial account of Baudelaire's conversion in English is in Enid Starkie's biography. See especially Starkie, *Baudelaire*, 530–34, 587–89, 608–9, 612. Baudelaire's religious poem "The Unforseen" was published 1863.

in any kind of redemption, he believed intensely in the reality of sin.⁴ “To the Reader,” the first poem in *Les Fleurs du Mal*, begins like this:

Stupidity, delusion, selfishness and lust
Torment our bodies and possess our minds
While we sustain our affable remorse
The way a beggar nourishes his lice.⁵

And the volume ends with this, from “Travelers”:

Chief among all the wonders we glimpsed,
In every hole and corner, forced on our sight
At every turn of fortune’s fatal wheel—
The boring pageant of immortal sin:

Woman a slave and yet vainglorious,
Stupid and unashamed in her self-love;
Man a greedy tyrant, slave of his slaves,
Swelling the sewer to stinking flood;

Victims in tears, the hangman glorified
The banquet seasoned and festooned with blood
The poison of power clogs the despot’s veins,
And the people kiss the knout that scourges them.⁶

Baudelaire was a kind of hyper-Augustinian, seeing utter corruption and total depravity (in the theologically unsophisticated sense) in everything.⁷ He saw nature and the whole created

4. See for example: “Baudelaire is not always certain in his notion of Good” (Eliot, “Baudelaire,” 343); “All he had left at a certain point was to revel in his own damnation” (Gioia, “Conversation,” 79); “It is frequently noted about Baudelaire that he sees sin but not redemption” (Meltzer, “Baudelaire, Maistre and Original Sin”). “Redemption, given this situation, appears hopeless” (Mills, “Charles Baudelaire,” [n.p.]).

5. Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du Mal*, 5; Baudelaire, *Oeuvres Complètes*, 1:5.

6. Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du Mal*, 155; Baudelaire, *Oeuvres Complètes*, 1:132.

7. Meltzer, *Seeing Double*, 32. Meltzer, “Baudelaire, Maistre and Original Sin.” As Meltzer says, Baudelaire’s hyper-Augustinianism was egged on by his reading of Joseph de Maistre. However, Baudelaire’s often rough treatment

world, and hence, by implication, its creator, as something fundamentally evil. As with many imaginative writers since the Enlightenment, his spirituality shares much with Gnosticism,⁸ and indeed some of Baudelaire's speculations in prose do recall that ancient heresy:

What is the fall?
If it is unity become duality, it is God who has fallen.
In other words, is not creation the fall of God?⁹

Accordingly, while Baudelaire was far from chaste in his personal life, he was no simple celebrant of sensual indulgence. For him, sex always has an inescapable moral component, however perverse. As he puts it in his notes:

The unique and supreme pleasure of love lies in the absolute certainty of doing evil.¹⁰

There are certain layers of irony to that statement, but it seems clear that, for Baudelaire, as for many Gnostics, sexual reproduction was a horror and his work expresses a decided preference for non-reproductive sexual acts. In his novel, *La Fanfara-*lo**, the poet's alter ego is described thus:

[H]e considered reproduction as a vice of love, pregnancy as a spider's malady. He had written somewhere: the angels are hermaphrodite and sterile.¹¹

of God in his poetry was certainly not derived from Maistre. See also Leakey, *Baudelaire and Nature*, 140–41, 150–60. By no means was Baudelaire ever consistent in his condemnation of nature. As Leakey notes, even after Baudelaire began to adopt a more definite negative view of nature in 1852, his statements and poetic practice were always somewhat contradictory. Leakey, *Baudelaire and Nature*, 127–29, 134, 137, 317–20.

8. There has been considerable controversy over the category of Gnosticism. See Brakke, "Imagining 'Gnosticism' and Early Christianities," 1–28 for a good discussion of the issue. I disagree with Brakke's ultimate conclusion and take Gnosticism to be a useful interpretive category. However, I agree that it was not a single unitary religion, either in ancient times or across history.

9. Baudelaire, *Oeuvres Complètes*, 1:688

10. Baudelaire, *Oeuvres Complètes*, 1:652

11. Baudelaire, *Oeuvres Complètes*, 1:577

In the poem “Damned Women: Delphine and Hippolyta,” Baudelaire goes on to commend lesbians for “the harsh sterility of [their] delight,”¹² while in the poem “Lesbos” he admires how the young women there “caress their ripened limbs in sterile joy.”¹³ Going against nature as they do, these relations cannot, of course, be free from suffering, but at least they at least do not perpetuate the painful existence of a sinful humanity, nor do they set the stage for the, at least for Baudelaire, necessarily horrifying struggle between mother and child. (His relationship with his mother was notoriously fraught.)

But, again, much like many with Gnostic tendencies, Baudelaire celebrates both abstinence *and* debauchery, exalting the far extremes of sexual practice, as here in “Damned Women”:

Virgins, demons, monsters, martyrs,
All great spirits scornful of reality,
Saints and satyrs in search of the infinite,
Racked with sobs or loud with ecstasy.¹⁴

St. Anthony, nuns, lesbians, all get thrown into the hopper. All of them, in Baudelaire’s view, seek a kind of pure transcendence that frustrates the ends of nature’s god.

What most sets Baudelaire apart from the Gnostics, however, is that he does not expect any sort of salvation out of this. Gnosis cannot save, for the only possible knowledge is knowledge of one’s doom. He does commend various methods for approaching the transcendent, but these things, sex, drugs, art, even virtue, offer only brief respites from a world fundamentally composed of suffering and despair. They may offer consolation, but no hope. In “Be Drunk” he says:

So as not to be the martyred slaves of time, be perpetually drunk. On wine, on poetry, or on virtue, as you wish, but be drunk!¹⁵

12. Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du Mal*, 129. Baudelaire, *Oeuvres Complètes*, 1:155.

13. Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du Mal*, 124. Baudelaire, *Oeuvres Complètes*, 1:150

14. Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du Mal*, 130. Baudelaire, *Oeuvres Complètes*, 1:114.

However, just as his attitude towards sex is not one of uncomplicated celebration, Baudelaire was considerably more ambivalent about alcohol and drugs than his popular reputation might suggest. Drugs and alcohol likewise offer brief flashes of ecstasy, but they are still intimately connected with pain, and the temporary heaven they create is particularly empty and devoid of meaning. Baudelaire even devoted a large part to his book *Artificial Paradises* to the isolating dangers of hashish and the debilitations that come with opium, though he remained relatively positive towards wine.¹⁶

Above all, it is beauty which most lifts us most substantially out of the ordinary world. In “Hymn to Beauty,” he writes:

Angel or Siren, rhythm, fragrance, light,
 Provided you transform—O my one queen
 This hideous universe, this heavy hour.¹⁷

But, of course, even the experience of beauty fades. No matter how grand, complex or apparently complete the vision, one is forever being yanked back to reality, as in “The Double Room”:

[A]ll this magic dissolved at the brutal knock struck by the spectre. . .
 . Horrors! I remember! I remember! Yes! This hovel, this abode of
 eternal boredom, is truly mine. The furniture, stupid, dusty, chipped;
 the hearth without flame or coal, wet with spittle. The sad windows
 where the rain has traced its furrows in the dust; the manuscripts, ef-
 faced or incomplete; the almanac where pencil has marked off the
 unlucky dates.¹⁸

Furthermore, arising, as it so often does, out of the sexual appetite, beauty, the vision of the ideal, is forever tied to evil and the pain that attends it.

Just as he refuses to celebrate in any simple way the joys of sensual indulgence, Baudelaire kept some distance from what

15. Baudelaire, *Oeuvres Complètes*, 1:337.

16. Hemmings, “O Just, Subtle and Mighty Opium,” 232–48. See also Burt, “Baudelaire and Intoxicants,” 117–29.

17. Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du Mal*, 29. Baudelaire, *Oeuvres Complètes*, 1:25.

18. Baudelaire, *Oeuvres Complètes*, 1:281.

might be called the alternative spiritualities of his era. He does make occasional references to the occult and obviously had at least some general familiarity with the subject, but the contrast with writers such as Honoré de Balzac, Victor Hugo, Robert Browning, or Butler Yeats is striking. *They* go on and on about their table-rappings and alchemical researches, sometimes writing whole books about them. But not only are references to alchemy and the occult in Baudelaire rather sparse, they tend towards the negative, as in “To the Reader”:

Satan Trismegistus subtly rocks
 Our ravished spirits on his wicked bed
 Until the precious metal of our will
 Is leached out by this cunning alchemist:¹⁹

It is true that the poet here revels in defeat and degradation, but it is defeat and degradation that he revels in. In “Alchemy of Suffering”:

Trismegistus intercedes:
 This ever-daunting guide
 Makes me a Midas in reverse,
 Saddest of alchemists—

Gold turns to iron at my touch,
 Heaven darkens to hell;
 Clouds become a winding sheet²⁰

However pessimistic about orthodox Christianity Baudelaire may be, he seems no less skeptical of any other routes to salvation.

Like many literary people in the nineteenth century, Baudelaire did show some interest in the eccentric Swedish visionary Emmanuel Swedenborg. It is unclear how much of Swedenborg

19. Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du Mal*, 5; Baudelaire, *Oeuvres Complètes*, 1:5.

20. Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du Mal*, 78; Baudelaire, *Oeuvres Complètes*, 1:77.

Baudelaire actually read,²¹ but there are several brief references to the Swede in his work,²² and he picked up on the Swedenborgian term “correspondences,” which was used by Swedenborg to describe the intimate connection between the inner and outer, the material and spiritual worlds. Individual oddities aside, Swedenborg’s system was largely a revival of medieval allegory²³ and his view of correspondences reflects a mostly conventional religious understanding of how the cosmos is structured: common things in the world point up to higher spiritual realities. Baudelaire adopted Swedenborg for his own purposes, often emphasizing more earthbound analogies, such as those between different kinds of sensual experiences (sounds, colours, textures) as well as those between the different arts (literature, music, painting),²⁴ but this does not mean Baudelaire had found anything especially heterodox in Swedenborgian correspondences themselves.

Despite his infernal reputation, direct references to Satan and other devils are relatively infrequent in Baudelaire. Perhaps this reputation exists because, when the devils do appear, they tend to be quite memorable. Satan himself first shows up in “To the Reader,” audaciously conflated with the alchemical Hermes Trismegistus. Though hardly a pious poem, the portrait of Satan and the other devils there is not particularly objectionable from an orthodox perspective. They simply, though rather joyfully, preside over our sins:

Wriggling in our brains like a million worms
A demon demos holds its revels there,
And when we breathe the Lethe in our lungs
Trickles sighing on its secret course.²⁵

21. Wilkinson, *The Dream of an Absolute Language*, 220–21; Starkie, *Baudelaire*, 261.

22. Wilkinson, *The Dream of an Absolute Language*, 219, 222–23.

23. Wilkinson, *The Dream of an Absolute Language*, 93, 97.

24. For discussions of Baudelaire’s use of Swedenborg see Leakey, *Baudelaire and Nature*, 173–50; Starkie, *Baudelaire*, 260–69; Wilkinson, *The Dream of an Absolute Language*, 217–47.

25. Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du Mal*, 5; Baudelaire, *Oeuvres Complètes*, 1:5.

In contrast, one of the most notorious poems, “The Litanies of Satan,” offers up a direct prayer to Satan. He is presented as an exiled and wronged prince who sets himself up as patron of all “lepers and such outcast scum.” He is:

Adoptive father to those an angry God
The Father drove from his earthly paradise.²⁶

More ambivalently, in “Hymn to Beauty,” Satan is portrayed as at least a potential source of beauty:

Come from Satan, come from God—who cares²⁷

Two of the prose poems also prominently feature devils. In “The Temptations, or Eros, Wealth and Fame,” the temptations of the title are represented as three devils. Though all of them have a certain magnificence, the poet is not quite sold. As he says to Eros:

[E]ven if I did not know you, old monster, your mysterious cutlery,
your ambiguous vials, the chains in which your feet are entangled,
are symbols which disclose quite clearly the disadvantages of your
friendship. Keep your presents.²⁸

There are similar words for the heavily tattooed Wealth:

I have no need of the misery of any person for my enjoyment; and I
do not want a richness saddened, like a wallpaper, with all the misfor-
tunes represented on your skin.²⁹

And Fame:

I am not made to marry the mistress of certain people whom I do not
care to name.³⁰

In “The Generous Gambler,” one of the prose poems present-
ed above in a new translation, Satan himself appears. He is

26. Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du Mal*, 143–44; Baudelaire, *Oeuvres Complètes*, 1:124–25.

27. Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du Mal*, 29; Baudelaire, *Oeuvres Complètes*, 1:25.

28. Baudelaire, *Oeuvres Complètes*, 1:309.

29. Baudelaire, *Oeuvres Complètes*, 1:309.

30. Baudelaire, *Oeuvres Complètes*, 1:310.

presented as a witty and urbane nineteenth-century gentleman. The poet and the devil engage in some drinking and gambling, during which the poet rather carelessly loses his soul, and a droll discussion of the state of the world ensues. Then the devil makes some quite generous promises to make up for the poet's lost soul. Of course, the poet doesn't find the devil entirely trustworthy.

That is about it for Satan in the poems. However, together with the frequently macabre imagery, the often non-condemnatory depiction of sinful behaviour and the sometimes negative portrayal of God himself, the poems which do feature Satan begin to cast a shadow over the whole and can make it seem like that old serpent is actually the presiding spirit over all of them.

God himself in *Les Fleurs du Mal* is portrayed in multiple ambivalent and contradictory ways. In "To the Reader," the opening poem in *Les Fleurs du Mal*, God is simply absent. Elsewhere, as in "The Little Old Women," God can appear as the embodiment of a kind of impersonal fate:

Ancient eyes
under God's undeviating paw³¹

In "Abel and Cain," God becomes a patron of the complacent middle class, apparently happy to see those on the margins ground into dust, thus becoming a worthy object of revolt:

Race of Abel, sleep and feed,
God is pleased.

Grovel in the dirt and die,
Race of Cain . . .

Rise up, Race of Cain
and cast God down upon earth!³²

31. Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du Mal*, 97; Baudelaire, *Oeuvres Complètes*, 1:91.

32. Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du Mal*, 142; Baudelaire, *Oeuvres Complètes*, 1:122–23.

In another poem, “St. Peter’s Denial,” God is even more straightforwardly wicked:

Like a tyrant gorged on meat and wine, He sleeps
The sound of our blasphemies sweet in His ears.

The martyrs sobs, the screaming at the stake
Compose, no doubt, a heady symphony;
Indeed for all the blood their pleasure cost
The heavens have not had half enough.³³

Elsewhere, as in “The Litanies of Satan,” God is portrayed as “jealous” and “angry.” Yet, in contrast, the God of “Consecration,” though still primarily a punisher of humans, at least aims to bring beauty, and thus a kind of *aesthetic* salvation, into being through that punishment:

Thanks be to God who gives us suffering
As sacred remedy for our sins,
That best and purest element which prepares
The strong in spirit for divine delights!

I know the Poet has a place apart
Among the holy legions blessed ranks;
You will invite him to the eternal feast
Of Dominations, Virtues, Thrones and Powers;

I know that pain is the one nobility
Upon which hell itself cannot encroach
That if I am to weave my mystic crown
I must braid into it all time, all space . . .³⁴

Christ hardly appears in the poems. Aside from a few brief allusions, the most notable appearance is in “St. Peter’s Denial.” Jesus is generally portrayed quite positively there:

And when they spat on your divinity,

33. Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du Mal*, 141; Baudelaire, *Oeuvres Complètes*, 1:121.

34. Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du Mal*, 12–13; Baudelaire, *Oeuvres Complètes*, 1:9.

The jeering scullions and the conscript scum –
That moment when you felt the thorns impale
The skull which housed Humanity itself;³⁵

But he is mainly used as foil for a monstrously wicked God the Father:

Remember the Mount of Olives, Jesus? When
You fell on your knees and prayed to Him
Who laughed on high at the sound of hammering
As the butchers drove the nails into your flesh?³⁶

Ultimately, in a very Nietzschean move, the poet rejects the way of Jesus as weak and foolish:

Myself, I shall be satisfied to quit
A world where action is no kin to dreams;
Would I had used—and perished—by the sword!
Peter denied his master . . . He did well!³⁷

Theologically, the poem is in shambles, but it quite powerfully and coherently presents a certain mood.

Looking more generally at the pre-conversion body of Baudelaire's work, there is little consistency in his theology. Is evil good or is evil evil? Is God a tyrant to be defied or the source of goodness and beauty? Is Satan a source of energy for the artist and consolation for the outcast, or is he a false tempter? It is hard to know just what the poet thinks. For Baudelaire, there is definitely a top and a bottom, but one can never be sure exactly what goes where.³⁸ That might not be acceptable in a philosopher or systematic theologian, but for a poet as poet, it actually works well.

35. Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du Mal*, 141–42; Baudelaire, *Oeuvres Complètes*, 1:121–22.

36. Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du Mal*, 141–42; Baudelaire, *Oeuvres Complètes*, 1:121–22.

37. Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du Mal*, 141–42; Baudelaire, *Oeuvres Complètes*, 1:121–22.

38. Meltzer (“Baudelaire, Maistre and Original Sin”) states, “The concept of evil in Baudelaire frequently ends up sublating his radical binary structures, such that Satan and God are often conflated.”

Enduring, as he did, poverty, illness, and neglect in the years after *Les Fleurs du Mal*, Baudelaire did eventually begin to turn sincerely to God. In a series of notes he begins to write:

- Prayer: charity, wisdom and strength.
- Without charity, I am only a resounding cymbal.
- My humiliations have been graces from God.
- My egotistical phase, is it over?³⁹

A new humility appears in the poet. He no longer puts such value on worldly fame and success and he begins to pray with real devotion. He resolves:

To pray every morning to God, the source of all power and all justice; to my father, to Mariette and to Poe, as intercessors; that they may give me the strength necessary to fulfil all my duties and that they may grant my mother a long enough life to enjoy my transformation; to work all day, or at least as long as my strength allows; to put my trust in God, that is to say, in Justice itself, for the success of my plans; to offer, every evening, a further prayer, asking God for life and strength for my mother and myself; to divide all my earnings into four parts—one for current expenses, one for my creditors, one for my friends and one for my mother—to obey the strictest principles of sobriety, the first of which is abstinence from all stimulants, whatever they may be.⁴⁰

If “The Generous Gambler” is to be believed, Baudelaire had never completely ceased to pray:

[A]s I was going to bed, still saying my prayers through a residue of idiotic habit, I repeated [my prayer] while half-asleep.⁴¹

But now he truly meant it. Baudelaire’s faith was still a bit eccentric, featuring Edgar Allen Poe, along with his father and

39. Baudelaire, *Oeuvres Complètes*, 1:671.

40. Baudelaire, *Oeuvres Complètes*, 1:673.

41. Baudelaire, *Oeuvres Complètes*, 1:328, 1154–55, 1336–37. Baudelaire likely had started “The Generous Gambler” by 1860. It was completed and published by 1864. We can’t say for sure which was finished first, but his religious poem “The Unforseen” was published in 1863, before “The Generous Gambler.”

childhood nurse, as interceding saints, but it was sincere for all that.

There are still not many references to Christ, though there is this intriguing late fragment:

The dynamic ethic of Jesus.

Renan finds it ridiculous that Jesus should believe in the omnipotence, even over matter, of prayer and faith.

The sacraments are the means of this dynamic.⁴²

And in the notes for his never completed book on Belgium, he does write of how moved he was at the sight of “the eternal crucified” lifted up in procession.⁴³ It is apparent that Baudelaire’s faith was Catholic and Christian, rather than merely a general belief in God.

Though Baudelaire’s turn to religion is clear from his unfinished notes, it does not much appear in his finished literary works. There are a few prayers in the pre-conversion work, such as in the lines from “Consecration” quoted above, but they can come off as a bit self-aggrandizing or even selfish. Here is the ending of “One O’Clock in the Morning”:

Souls of those I have loved, souls of those I have sung, give me strength, sustain me, banish from me the lies and corrupting vapours of the world. And you, oh Lord my God! grant me the grace to write a few fine poems, so that I may know that I am not the least of men, that I am not inferior to those I despise.⁴⁴

There is what appears to be a more sincere prayer at the end of “A Voyage to Cythera,” where the poet, beholding an image of himself crucified by lust, cries out:

Lord, give the strength and courage to behold
My body and my heart without disgust.⁴⁵

42. Baudelaire, *Oeuvres Complètes*, 1:706.

43. Baudelaire, *Oeuvres Complètes*, 2:942.

44. Baudelaire, *Oeuvres Complètes*, 1:288.

45. Baudelaire, *Les Fleurs du Mal*, 136; Baudelaire, *Oeuvres Complètes*, 1:119.

But the most notable sincere prayer in the finished works is in “Mademoiselle Bistoury,” the other prose poem presented here in a new translation.⁴⁶ The poet encounters a mentally ill woman with a fetish for surgeons. She invites him up to her apartment and tries to convince him that he is a surgeon, so she can begin a romantic relationship with him. The poet admirably refuses to take advantage of her and then ends the poem with a plea to God for understanding of such a strange and disturbing occurrence. Much as in the Book of Job, the new “monsters” of the modern city provoke the narrator into a deep questioning of God, a questioning which, however, is not quite a rejection or indictment of him. Despite the young woman’s terrifying illness, for which she is not guilty, God is still appealed to as the standard of good. As T. S. Eliot notes in his essay on Baudelaire: for there really to be a down implies there really is an up.⁴⁷ Encounters with sin as sin, or with degradation as degradation, can often, surprisingly, point us upward to God.

At this point, Baudelaire had begun to take the Devil more seriously too. In the earlier “The Generous Gambler” the irony is so layered so thick that it is difficult to know just how seriously he took pronouncements like this:

My dear brethren, never forget, when you hear the progress of the Enlightenment extolled, that the devil’s finest trick is to persuade you he does not exist!⁴⁸

Though I suspect even then he took it more seriously than many suppose, by the time of his verse poem “The Unforseen,” there is no doubt:

Whereupon appears One they had all denied—

Crucially, however, Baudelaire now thinks there is some true escape from all this sin and evil:

46. “Mademoiselle Bistoury” is almost certainly a post-conversion work. Baudelaire only submitted it for periodical publication in 1867, the year of his death, and it was finally published posthumously in 1869 in book form, along with all of his other prose poems. Baudelaire, *Oeuvres Complètes*, 1:1347.

47. Eliot, “Baudelaire,” 338–39, 343–44.

48. Baudelaire, *Oeuvres Complètes*, 1:327.

My soul in Thy hands is more than a futile toy
And thy wisdom is infinite⁴⁹

His own concluding note says:

Here the author of *Les Fleurs du Mal* is turning towards eternal life. It had to end up this way.⁵⁰

Baudelaire's health did not permit much time to see how his newfound faith would manifest itself in art, but even the earlier work has value for the theologically minded. Something like "The Generous Gambler" is not all that far off from C. S. Lewis' *The Screwtape Letters*, which it might have influenced. (Lewis refers to Baudelaire a couple times and must have read at least some of his work.)⁵¹ Indeed, the quote about the devil's finest trick has often been attributed to Lewis himself. Negative images of the world can still reveal God, and Baudelaire at his most perverse was never in denial about the terrible corruptness of human desire. Thus his work has the constant bite of reality to it.

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49. Baudelaire, *Oeuvres Complètes*, 1:171–72. We cannot say whether "The Unforseen" or "The Generous Gambler" was completed first.

50. Baudelaire, *Oeuvres Complètes*, 1:171.

51. Lewis, *The Pilgrim's Regress*, 208; Lewis, "C. S. Lewis to E. R. Eddison, January 19, 1943," 546.

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