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Baudelaire now: the sounds of childhood

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A major issue, beyond all forms of pointless subjective concerns, is that of the changes in one's representation, not of an artwork but of an artist. The fact is that one's appreciation of a creator is never constant – the reason an actor finds Shakespeare a genius is bound to vary according to one's age, background, ideals, or how one's life has previously been shaken. So, as a researcher in the interaction of philosophy and translation, I aim first to retrace the stages of my appreciation of the poet that has accompanied my life for many years.

Lately as I learnt of the suicide of a younger colleague and friend, the only thing I could express was through quoting Baudelaire, 'la mort, le seul vrai but de la détestable vie!' ('Le Tir et le cimetière'). This would never have occurred to my mind in my early or mature years.

I discovered Baudelaire when I was a child, and through the sense of hearing. In those days, there were no television sets in homes and my father, who had been a professional actor, would act in radio programmes, plays or texts. So he would help me learn to recite poems for school. What I liked in Baudelaire's poetry was his art of words especially his use of the specifically French *mélodie* (melopoeia, different from the melody of Italian speech, so close to singing) sometimes verging on melancholy, maybe because of its regular patterns, the glide with the 'mute *é*', the barely pronounced nasal sounds, the predominantly soft consonants, the returning last-syllable stress ... I was obviously unaware of all this, and learnt later that I had detected a touch of art for art's sake in Baudelaire,

Celui [...]
– Qui plane sur la vie, et comprend sans effort
Le langage des fleurs et des choses muettes!
(*'Élévation'*)

Forgetting about my own case, I wonder if European education is so right in directing children to ideas and meanings, whereas, at their age, the beauty of sounds is what really appeals to them. ‘Harmonie du Soir’ needs no additional explanation; ‘les sons et les parfums tournent dans l’air du soir, [...] | Le soleil s’est noyé dans son sang qui se fige’ is something every child has experienced in summer evenings. Likewise, I doubt a primary school child will not understand, or be sensitive to

Mon enfant, ma sœur,
Songe à la douceur
D’aller là-bas vivre ensemble
Aimer à loisir
Aimer et mourir
Au pays qui te ressemble!
(‘L’Invitation au voyage’)

Later I found another Baudelaire; still puzzled by the oxymoron collection of ‘poèmes en prose’, but leaving it for later days, I revelled in almost metaphysical poetry:

La Nature est un temple où de vivants piliers
Laissent parfois sortir de confuses paroles;
L’homme y passe à travers des forêts de symboles
Qui l’observent avec des regards familiers.
(‘Correspondances’)

I knew a lot by heart – training at the Conservatoire may have helped in that sense. Of course, I read Sartre on Baudelaire and, though severe in my estimation, the philosopher showed me another facet of the genius. Unlike many of my fellow-students, I stuck to the idea of Baudelaire as a lord of poetry but never ranked him among literature’s great names: too non-conformist for that!

Another period of my life began with my discovery and long travels with the English philosopher G. E. Moore. I extended my quest to the Bloomsbury Circle, and went on living with Baudelaire as a companion, but not as an object of study. I sometimes reflected upon the distance between Moore’s and the poet’s concepts of Beauty, wondering if they were that far from each other:

Je trône dans l’azur comme un sphinx incompris;
J’unis un cœur de neige à la blancheur des cygnes;
Je hais le mouvement qui déplace les lignes,

Et jamais je ne pleure et jamais je ne ris.
(‘La Beauté’)

It was also the period when my thought fructified on the most uncommon, unexpected address to the reader,

Tu le connais, lecteur, ce monstre délicat,
– Hypocrite lecteur, – mon semblable, – mon frère!
(‘Au Lecteur’)

that sounded like thunder in the sky of morals! How could readers, how could *I*, be charged with hypocrisy? What word then would be appropriate for the Prosecutor General Ernest Pinard? As early as 1857, Baudelaire had opened the road to Wilde, but also to Bergson’s *morale close* and *morale ouverte*, and to Moore’s ethical emancipation from morals, too.

Very recently, my relationship to Baudelaire changed totally due to a superb documentary film I saw about his youth. Thus far I had never been interested in biographies, thinking they spoilt one’s love of a poet’s work. Yet, this time, it was quite the opposite, ‘J’ai longtemps habité sous de vastes portiques’ was no longer a riddle. We were brothers in exile; he had settled on *Île Maurice* and *Île Bourbon* (1841-42); I had spent my early childhood abroad. Both of us enjoyed the sunlit beauty of an exotic cradle, till our lives suddenly shattered, being suddenly uprooted from bliss towards Europe, where more often than not ‘le ciel bas et lourd pèse comme un couvercle’ [Et] nous verse un jour noir plus triste que les nuits’ (‘Spleen (IV)’). His ‘*vies antérieures*’ that had obsessed me for so long were suddenly mine,

C’est là que j’ai vécu dans les voluptés calmes
Au milieu de l’azur, des vagues, des splendeurs
(‘La Vie antérieure’)

Now all that’s left to me is the expectation of a black-feathered raven to approach my haunts and announce my final departure, as it did for Charles and Edgar Allan ...

So why is it so important to ‘document’ one’s experience of a dead poet, however important the encounter may be? The answer probably lies in ‘Phares’, which may be read as a

praise of painters, but also as a phenomenology of an aesthetic experience, in which an artist is the missing link between each man and some unsaid, mute, reality,

Ces malédictions, ces blasphèmes, ces plaintes,
[...] sont un écho redit par mille labyrinthes
(‘Les Phares’)

Baudelaire is Baudelaire for Baudelaire, maybe! For each of us, he is the right mix of emotions and appropriateness, freedom and relevance, an ethos put into words.