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To read T. S. Eliot's 1930 essay 'Baudelaire', that introduces a translation of *Intimate Journals*, is to be thrown back into a very different literary era, especially now when the whole idea of introductions seems to have fallen out of favour with major publishers. (Some notion perhaps that they interfere with the pure and unmediated response of readers?) Beyond that, what's striking is the assured, authoritative tone and the poet's depth of knowledge of a foreign language and culture. It was written the year Eliot published 'Ash Wednesday', and is the work of a poet in full and confident maturity, after a long and searching familiarity with an œuvre that had signally influenced his own development.

Eliot's conversion to an Anglicanism with a distinctly Catholic tinge occurred three years earlier, and much of the essay is concerned to establish the great French forebear as a kind of Christian poet whose wilful deviations from orthodoxy and doctrine – 'he has the excesses of a Tertullian' – only serve to express his centrality to that tradition; his *ennui* shades into '*acedia*, arising from an unsuccessful struggle towards the spiritual life'. In brief, he has a Christian soul in a thwarted earlier stage of development, but his rebellion against God reveals his adherence to the faith – and, put crudely, you can't sincerely blaspheme against something you don't believe in. It's a line of argument, already nascent in Baudelaire's trial for obscenity and well-developed in France by 1917 when Alfred Poizat wrote in *Le Correspondant*: 'There was not a poet of the C19th who had a mind as deeply Catholic as that of Baudelaire, nor one who was more of a believer than him' (my translation). Eliot's criticisms of Baudelaire are largely respectful: 'His apparatus, by which I do not mean his command of words and rhythms, but his stock of imagery (and every poet's stock of imagery is circumscribed somewhere), is not wholly perdurable or adequate.' This striking thought – that every poet has a finite range of imagery – is slipped in deftly to suggest, by way of a courteous negative, that this is a predicament even Baudelaire shares with other lesser poets. (It's reminiscent

of Baudelaire's own remark that every poet must carry around in his head a dictionary of rhymes.) The casual, jarring word 'stock' with all of its commercial and utilitarian connotations serves to demystify the poet's craft.

Eliot goes on to sharpen the criticism in the next sentence by instancing those elements in Baudelaire's work that the passage of time has not been kind to: 'His prostitutes, mulattoes, Jewesses, serpents, cats, corpses form a machinery that has not worn well'. By demoting, at least in the first three examples, the human to the level of imagistic machinery, I believe Eliot is seriously undervaluing the importance to the poet of all three, though the reader might concede that not all the *poète maudit* paraphernalia has weathered well. Baudelaire may be vulnerable to a critique that would see these images as mere projections of aspects of his own soul, and yet they figure prominently and purposefully in his work. Eliot's urbane view that this imagery has become a kind of 'outmoded detritus' reveals its own limitations. The centrality of the 'négresse' in 'Le Cygne' would be a good place to start in examining Eliot's claim and approaching the French poet's actual use of such images. It might also show something evidently 'perdurable' about his imagery as well as the persisting relevance of his poems.

'Le Cygne' is a vast panorama, geographic and historic, as well as an interior landscape of memory. In the course of its thirteen quatrains, it moves from ancient Troy to modern Paris and back again, from Andromaque, Hector's widow who became a slave and concubine of Achilles' son Pyrrhus, to an unnamed 'négresse' seeking a lost Africa, and to other images of orphans, stranded sailors as well as the swan itself. It proceeds like a roll call of loss, and yet is rich in minutely observed details such as the convulsive movement of the swan's neck or the contours of the Louvre environs in reconstruction.

The poem has its source in Virgil, rather than Homer, Euripides, or indeed Racine. When it was first published in a journal (*La Causerie*), the dedication to the exiled Victor Hugo was followed by the epigraph 'Falsi Simoentis ad undam' – beside the false Simois – from *Aenead* III. 302, with reference to Andromaque's exile and servitude in Phthia, where to console herself, she

imagines the river of Troy. So much for the epigraph, but I'd like to dwell further on the dedication. It's not the only poem by Baudelaire to be dedicated to Hugo – 'Les Sept vieillards', the one that follows in most editions of *Les Fleurs du mal* (though it was published in *Le Nouveau revue* four months earlier in September 1859), shares the same dedication. Neither are random, or mere tributes to a senior, admired poet. It signifies, and has an important bearing on the poem, as well as shedding some light on Eliot's more general comment.

The opening of Baudelaire's essay 'Victor Hugo: *Les Misérables'* is an illuminating argument as to why Hugo as a poet 'est moralisé sans le vouloir, *par abondance et plénitude de nature*' (Baudelaire's italics). The argument is crucial also for our understanding of the poem. He presents Hugo, in a dialectic, as being drawn, because of his vigorous temperament, by an equal love 'pour ce qui est très-fort comme pour ce qui est très-faible'. He shows himself as the friend – '*l'ami attendri de tout ce qui est faible, solitaire, contristé; de tout ce qui est orphelin*' (Baudelaire's italics). Note also that last word which recurs in the poem. If this is true of Hugo, it is at least equally so of Baudelaire whose poems are populated by the downtrodden and outcast, *les marginaux*, including 'the prostitutes, the mulattoes and Jewesses' to quote Eliot once more. It is ironic that Eliot in weighing up Baudelaire's credentials as a Christian poet, his doctrinal non-conformism and so on, should see as time-worn and trite these very elements that could arguably most qualify him as a Christian poet, at least in his sympathies. He praises Hugo, in a subtle argument, for his 'charité' (the paramount Christian or Pauline virtue) which has nothing programmatic or didactic about it, and so distinguishes the poet from any kind of 'pédanterie', or what we might now call virtue-signalling. It's an intriguing essay that touches on the point that Hazlitt makes about poetry being drawn to power, but offers a deeper, more dialectical relation, that it is, or should be, equally attracted to the disempowered. Eliot seems to me oblivious to this crucial element in Baudelaire's work.

'Le Cygne' embodies those temperamental traits which he praises in Hugo – chez Baudelaire, likewise, manifest in a way that may be 'moralizing' without aiming to be so. In the poem, the titular swan has escaped its 'cage' – an odd detail but it's odder still that the bird speaks.

The weather too is peculiar; there's a storm but the air is silent, the stream is dry. It is psychic weather, psychic geography and history. And yet the detail of the

> […] négresse, amaigrie et phtisique
> Piétant dans la boue, et cherchant, l'oeil hagard,
> Les cocotiers absents de la superbe Afrique
> Derrière la muraille immense du brouillard;

is arguably the central image of the poem, the counter-image to the swan's white feathers. Swan and woman share the same fate of displacement and exile, the same state of Andromaque at the poem's opening. While the image of the African coconut trees may sound merely exotic, they evoke a luxuriance in contrast to the arid urban landscape as the wall of fog that obscures them evokes a whole other weather system, and the effect is far from suggestive of a tired prop, especially with the detail of the black woman's haggard, consumptive state. In a time such as ours of thousands of refugees arriving in Europe from Africa and the Middle East, forced to survive in makeshift tents, this picture hasn't shed any of its force or relevance.

The reader has to decide whether the poet's identification with another person's suffering is appropriative or empathetic. Perhaps both at once. Here, again, the issue of what Eliot calls the 'perdurable' obtrudes. What lasts and what fades. My own sense of the dated attaches rather more to a phrase such as 'toute pour moi devient allégorie', the constant transformation of the world into symbol, and yet without it Baudelaire would lose his framework. While 'Le Cygne' abounds in symbols for Baudelaire's inner state, I suspect that a modern sensibility is more drawn to the moments in the poem where actuality *transcends* the symbolic, 'le bric-à-brac confus' of the construction work, for example, and most tellingly the figure of the black woman who appears towards the end.

The exclamatory address of the poem from its opening 'Andromaque, je pense à vous!' to its 'Je pense à mon grand cygne', to its final lines: 'Je pense aux matelots oubliés dans une île, |Aux captifs, aux vaincus!… à bien d'autres encor!' is the sustained monologue of the poet wandering over a changeable but familiar terrain, *piétant lui-même*, arrested by images, and memories of the

streets he is passing through – 'la forme d'une ville | Change plus vite, hélas! que le cœur d'un mortel' […] 'Paris change!'. Thirteen exclamation marks (unevenly distributed through the thirteen stanzas) indicate the jagged progress of this inner promenade, the jolts of consciousness, of an exasperated awareness. The vertical punctuation clatters down like hailstones on the stately though fractured alexandrines. Even the poem's first line is interrupted by two cesurae ('Andromaque, je pense à vous! Ce petit fleuve'), an effect mirrored by the final line's gaping caesura and aposiopesis 'Aux captifs, aux vaincus!… à bien d'autres encor!'.

This organizing axis of the poem – 'Je pense à…' – isn't a Cartesian assertion but rather a thinking about something or someone who in turn is thinking about something that has been taken away, that no longer is. The word 'absent' hovers over this poem that is haunted by what has disappeared or been replaced – architecture, nature, weather. Given the repetition of the phrase the poem is also about a repeated, ever more ingrained state. The prominent 'I' of the poem includes and overarches widows, orphans, the black woman, sailors, and 'bien d'autres choses'.

Eliot's demurral with regard to the 'prostitutes, mulattoes, and Jewesses' seems less than ever accurate about 'Le Cygne'. On the contrary, it seems as if the French poet had a more prescient notion of the future than Eliot did. Baudelaire's prolonged, often agonized relationship with Jeanne Duval in itself might encourage a more serious engagement with the imagery of 'Le Cygne', though that biographical prompt alone neither implicates nor exculpates the poet. It is worth noting, however, that as Enid Starkie tells, in his very last days of illness, Baudelaire's principal anxiety and concern was that Duval be given what money he had, and that she be provided against the poverty and ill-health from which she was suffering. This would suggest, as does the whole orchestral movement of 'Le Cygne', one of his longest and most intricate poems, that Baudelaire was not merely employing 'stock' imagery but touching a crucial and emotionally charged part of his vision which reveals much about his own era and connects intimately with ours.