

TO ARSENE HOUSSAYE

MY DEAR FRIEND, I send you a little work of which no one can say, without doing it an injustice, that it has neither head nor tail, since, on the contrary, everything in it is both head and tail, alternately and reciprocally. I beg you to consider how admirably convenient this combination is for all of us, for you, for me, and for the reader. We can cut wherever we please, I may dream, you your manuscript, the reader his reading; for I do not keep the reader's restive mind hanging in suspense on the threads of an interminable and superfluous plot. Take away one vertebra and the two ends of this tortuous fantasy come together again without pain. Chop it into numerous pieces and you will see that each one can get along alone. In the hope that there is enough life in some of these segments to please and to amuse you, I take the liberty of dedicating the whole serpent to you.

I have a little confession to make. It was while running through, for the twentieth time at least, the pages of the famous *Casparé de la Nuit* of Aloysius Bertrand (has not a book known to you, to me, and to a few of our friends the right to be called famous?) that the idea came to me of attempting something in the same vein, and of applying to the description of our more abstract modern life the same method he used in depicting the old days, so strangely picturesque.

Which one of us, in his moments of ambition, has not dreamed of the miracle of a poetic prose, musical, without rhythm and without rhyme, supple enough and rugged enough

to adapt itself to the lyrical impulses of the soul, the undulations of reverie, the jibes of conscience?

It was, above all, out of my exploration of huge cities, out of the medley of their innumerable interrelations, that this haunting ideal was born. You yourself, dear friend, have you not tried to translate in a song the *Glazier's* strident cry, and to express in lyric prose all the dismal suggestions this cry sends up through the fog of the street to the highest garrets?

To tell the truth, however, I am afraid that my envy has not been propitious. From the very beginning I perceived that I was not only far from my mysterious and brilliant model, but was, indeed, doing something (if it can be called *something*) singularly different, an accident which any one else would glory in, no doubt, but which can only deeply humiliate a mind convinced that the greatest honor for a poet is to succeed in doing exactly what he set out to do.

Yours most affectionately,

C. B.

I

THE STRANGER

TELL ME, enigmatical man, whom do you love best, your father,
your mother, your sister, or your brother?

I have neither father, nor mother, nor sister, nor brother.
Your friends?

Now you use a word whose meaning I have never known.

Your country?

I do not know in what latitude it lies.

Beauty?

I could indeed love her, Goddess and Immortal.
Gold?

I hate it as you hate God.

Then, what do you love, extraordinary stranger?

I love the clouds...the clouds that pass...up there...
up there...the wonderful clouds!

THE OLD WOMAN'S DESPAIR

A WIZENED little old woman felt gladdened and gay at the sight of the pretty baby that every one was making such a fuss over, and that every one wanted to please; such a pretty little creature, as frail as the old woman herself, and toothless and hairless like her.

She went up to him all nods and smiles.

But the infant, terrified, struggled to get away from her caresses, filling the house with his howls.

Then the old woman went back into her eternal solitude and wept alone, saying: "Ah, for us miserable old females the age of pleasing is past. Even innocent babes cannot endure us, and we are scarecrows to little children whom we long to love."

ARTIST'S CONFITEOR

HOW POIGNANT the late afternoons of autumn! Ah! poignant to the verge of pain, for there are certain delicious sensations which are no less intense for being vague; and there is no sharper point than that of Infinity.

What bliss to plunge the eyes into the immensity of sky and sea! Solitude, silence, incomparable chastity of the blue! a tiny sail shivering on the horizon, imitating by its littleness and loneliness my irremediable existence, monotonous melody of the waves, all these things think through me or I through them (for in the grandeur of reverie the ego is quickly lost!); I say they *think*, but musically and picturesquely, without quibblings, without syllogisms, without deductions.

These thoughts, whether they come from me or spring from things, soon, at all events, grow too intense. Energy in voluptuousness creates uneasiness and actual pain. My nerves are strung to such a pitch that they can no longer give out anything but shrill and painful vibrations.

And now the profound depth of the sky dismays me; its purity irritates me. The insensibility of the sea, the immutability of the whole spectacle revolt me... Ah! must one eternally suffer, or else eternally flee beauty? Nature, pitiless sorceress, ever victorious rival, do let me be! Stop tempting my desires and my pride! The study of beauty is a duel in which the artist shrieks with terror before being overcome.

EPILOGUE

Happy of heart I climbed the hill
To contemplate the town in its enormity,
Brothel and hospital, prison, purgatory, hell,
Monstrosities flowering like a flower.
But you, O Satan, patron of my pain,
Know I went not to weep for them in vain.
But like old lecher to old mistress goes,
Seeking but rapture, I sought out this trull
Immense, whose hellish charm resuscitates.
Whether in morning sheets you lie asleep,
Hidden and heavy with a cold, or flaunt
Through night in golden spangled veils,
Infamous City, I adore you! Courtesans
And bandits, you offer me such joys,
The common herd can never understand.

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BEAUTY

I am as lovely as a dream in stone;
My breast on which each finds his death in turn
Inspires the poet with a love as lone
As everlasting clay, and as taciturn.

Swan-white of heart, a sphinx no mortal knows,
My throne is in the heaven's azure deep;
I hate all movement that disturbs my pose;
I smile not ever, neither do I weep.

Before my monumental attitudes,
Taken from the proudest plastic arts,
My poets pray in austere studious moods,
For I, to fold enchantment round their hearts,
Have pools of light where beauty flames and dies,
The placid mirrors of my luminous eyes.

Translated by F. P. Sturm

Cf: "Venus And The Motley Fools," page 10.

from: "Fleurs du Mal"
[Flowers of Evil]"

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