

## ONOMASTICS AND RELIGION IN BAUDELAIRE'S

LES FLEURS DU MAL

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## I

The proper noun in Baudelaire's Les Fleurs du Mal, like the Atlas of mythology, carries a weighty burden. The onomastic import of the nineteenth-century French poet's writings is such that, without it, this universally acclaimed collection of poetry would not spawn so meaningfully the synthesis of realism and idealism with which the very name Baudelaire has become synonymous. It was Baudelaire's intent for the proper noun to assume this predominant role; for he recognized in his theoretical writings both the "substantive majesty" of the explicit nominal designation and the subordination of the various parts of speech to its heraldry.<sup>1</sup> Baudelaire's poetry is a poetry of "being;" that is to say of that which exists on a nominal plane, as opposed to the poetry of becoming of, say, a Rimbaud, whose essence has been described as predicative.<sup>2</sup> It is through the use of the proper noun that the poet of Les Fleurs du Mal delineates the multifarious dimensions of the work and introduces us to the timeless gods and personages of mythology, the Paris which he loved and scorned, the exotic countries which he identified with the women in his life, the authors and artists who provided him with inspiration and whom he recognized as spiritual brothers, the realm of metaphysics and religion where the various gods of all the years and all the cultures intermingle with biblical characters and the

prophets of the occult.

It is this last dimension which interests us primarily here, metaphysics and religion, that cloudy domain of paradise and wasteland whose critical surveyors have been able to agree neither on measure nor on perimeter. The divergent opinions, having accumulated over the century and a quarter following the publication of Les Fleurs du Mal, run the gamut from Baudelaire the satanist and Baudelaire the atheist to Baudelaire the Catholic and Baudelaire the Protestant. Perhaps Baudelaire the man was one or all of these; but Baudelaire the poet, on whom we focus, created a strange and foreboding universe whose uniqueness is conveyed by means of, among other things, the syncretistical and heterodoxical elements of nominal semantics. Whether it is a question of a saint, an apostle, a biblical figure, the Madonna, Christ, God, or Satan, the proper name is charged with a new, non-Christian valence. These valences may derive from other, and usually primitive, religions, from esoteric or occult doctrines, or from metaphysical or esthetic notions of the poet's own invention.

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, abbé 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.<sup>3</sup> Baudelaire of course protested; his

correspondence and intimate journals are replete with religious statements, many of them contradictory and most of them of a Christian orientation. Such statements, in addition to the abundance of "Christian" vocabulary in Les Fleurs du Mal, have led numerous critics to take a pro-Christian stance in his behalf, despite the syncretistic and heterodoxical elements evident in the text. This phenomenon is hardly surprising, for readers--no matter what their credentials--often find what they seek in a literary work; and, furthermore, Baudelaire was a master at cloaking his poetry in a mysterious shroud of opaque transparency much admired by the symbolist generations to follow.

This shroud (the term is not ill-advised, given the metaphysical and religious pessimism inherent in Les Fleurs du Mal) is nowhere more skillfully or significantly utilized than when it mantles a seemingly Christian onomastic reference. Though the limits of time and space of this particular study do not permit the depth and detail of my forthcoming Une Lecture onomastique des "Fleurs du Mal," numerous salient examples document convincingly, I believe, the pervasiveness of a stylistic and semantic phenomenon which undermines, poetically, many of the traditional teachings of Christianity.

## II

The representation of biblical figures and Christian saints, in Les Fleurs du Mal, is unfailingly enacted by means of the procedures of Scriptural negation, semantic distortion, or (and especially) poeticization in the name of art. Saint Anthony of Egypt (250-355 A. D.) is usually depicted as a paragon of asceticism and Christian devotion. His triumph over the satanic temptations of his desert hermitage is a triumph for Faith in a Christian God. Yet it is precisely this Faith which is missing in "Femmes damnées" ("Comme un bétail pensif..."), a poem devoted

to Sapphism:

D'autres comme des soeurs marchent lentes et graves  
 A travers les rochers pleins d'apparitions,  
 Où saint Antoine a vu surgir comme des laves  
 Les seins nus et pourprés de ses tentations.<sup>4</sup>

Like Saint Anthony, these women are "seekers of infinity" ("chercheuses d'infini," v. 33) who hunger for a spiritual hereafter. Nowhere, however, does Christian Piety appear as a remedy to their haunting visions or as an answer to their spiritual yearnings.

Similarly, Saint Peter in "Le Reniement de saint Pierre" is depicted solely in his famous moment of denial at the palace of the high priest as related in John 18. His role in early Christian proselytism, the courage he demonstrated as an apostle, his predications which led him abroad to die a martyr's death under Nero are not mentioned. In the Baudelaire poem there remains only the human frailty foretold by Christ Himself; Saint Peter is thus stripped of his saintliness. Likewise, Lazarus of Bethany, brother of Mary and Martha (John 11), undergoes an important change in "Le Flacon," a poem celebrating the poetical transcendency induced by the spiritual aura of Baudelaire's White Venus, Madame Sabatier. The miracle of "Le Flacon," rather than being to the glory of Christ's powers to raise the dead, belongs to the artistic dimension of poetic immortality. The image of Lazarus tearing the threads of his funeral shroud serves to postulate the resurrectional powers of the poet and of poetry. It is, in the end, a glorification of the timelessness of art, a poeticization of a sacred image.

The Madonna figure is a recurrent image in Les Fleurs du Mal. Most often it is the poet's beloved who shares with the Holy Virgin traits and virtues extolled by many writers before Baudelaire. In each instance, however, there is a special Baudelairean twist which renders the image distinct

and sets it apart from both Christian and mainstream French literary tradition. The invective poem A une Madone focuses on the poet's disheartening experiences with the voluptuous actress Marie Daubrun, known in theatrical circles of the time as a Madonna-like blonde whose impetuosity and egotism strained relations with all who knew her. The subtitle, "Ex-voto dans le goût espagnol," refers to the ecstatic Marianism of certain artists of the Spanish baroque period. If read on a literal plane, the poem is indeed sacrilegious: the Madonna of the piece is a "mortal mistress" of a jealous and sadistic poet. By the end of the poem, the reader realizes full well that this mortal Madonna's sole connection with the "Reine des Vierges" is her appearance. Rather than being sacrilegious or anti-Christian, the image is an affirmation of artistic liberty and poetic license.

Elsewhere the Madonna image exists on a loftier plane. In "Que diras-tu ce soir..." of the Madame Sabatier cycle, the beloved has a "divine air" about her; her flesh is "spiritual" and smells of angels. She becomes syncretistically Madonna, the classical Muse, and Guardian Angel when she implores the poet:

"...je suis belle, et j'ordonne  
Que pour l'amour de moi vous n'aimiez que le Beau;  
Je suis l'Ange gardien, la Muse et la Madonne."

Numerous other poems of the same cycle enhance the image. Her eyes shine forth mystically in "Le Flambeau vivant"; her spirit is descended from the highest celestial realms in "L'Aube spirituelle"; and the memory of her acquires the luster of a monstrosity in "Harmonie du soir." In these examples the Madonna has not lost her saintliness; simply, as a syncretistic representation of ideal beauty, she no longer belongs to a strictly Catholic or Christian tradition.

Other such onomastic designations are used diversely and creatively. A reference to a dying King David and the

young virgin who warms his failing body in I Kings (1, i-iv) again reinforces the virginal character of ideal beauty in "Réversibilité." Jeanne Duval, a tempting sorceress of quite another sort, assumes a diabolical identity in "Le Possédé." The poet refers to her as Beelzebub, a divinity of Phoenician origin who is prince of the demons in the Bible and second in command to Satan in Milton's Paradise Lost. Moses' miracle of bringing forth water from desert rock is associated with tears and sadomasochism in "L'Héautotimorouménos"; Judas becomes the Wandering Jew and a symbol of errant humanity in "Les Sept Vieillards"; Abel and Cain exchange roles in "Abel et Cain": it is the latter who is to inherit the earth and its bountifulness, according to this poem more in the tradition of the rebellious Cainites than of Judeo-Christian heritage.

### III

Is the God of Les Fleurs du Mal monotheistic? There is no clear answer to this question. At very least, it is a God of many faces and of many traditions. One encounters, for example, a vengeful and wrathful God akin to that of the Old Testament. In "Bénédition," the first poem of the work following the preface poem "Au Lecteur," God is portrayed as having chosen the poet's mother to bear a monstrous child (the poet) as a form of malevolent expiation and, one might say, with an intent diametrically opposed to that of the Immaculate Conception. Hatred, pain, and suffering are often associated with this God, as the poet recognizes fully in the last stanzas of "Bénédition." Animalistic traits are sometimes the sole attributes of this God; in "Le Rebelle," an angelic emissary swoops down out of the sky like an eagle, seizes the unbeliever by the hair, and commands him to love by dint of force and intimidation. The old women of "Les Petites Vieilles" also feel the "talons of God" sinking into their flesh, bending and breaking their

bodies until they, "octogenarian Eves," become "disjointed monsters." This God is a "jealous God," according to "Les Litanies de Satan"; a "gluttonous tyrant," He is "lulled to sleep by the sweet music" of dreadful blasphemy ("Le Reniement de saint Pierre"); a "mocking God," He condemns the poet to paint on a canvas of darkness in "Un Fantôme." Whether rooted in Old Testament texts or not, the anthropomorphic, animalistic, and anthroponymic characteristics of this God result in a humanization of the Deity, to the point of sharing with mankind all its vices which are otherwise attributed to noncelestial beings. In other terms, this God has descended from the heavenly spheres to inhabit a human plane and, in so doing, has lost His godliness only to sink into the depths of human imperfection.

Now nothing is simple in Les Fleurs du Mal. If this were the only God of the work, if these indeed were His sole traits, our task would be a relatively facile one. But God can be both compassionate and remorseful. In "Le Vin des chiffonniers" for instance, sleep is depicted as a gift to mankind bestowed by a God "touché de remords." At the same time the poet often prays to an understanding God for a "divine remedy" ("divin remède"), as in "Bénédiction," for the courage to contemplate his heart and his body in "Un Voyage à Cythère"; and the God of "L'Imprévu" (a late and in many ways anomalous poem) is a deity of "infinite prudence."

The Christ of Les Fleurs du Mal reflects most often the all-loving and all-charitable Son of God of the New Testament. Such is the image which comes forth in "Le Rebelle," despite the afore-mentioned ruthlessness of the eagle-like envoy sent, we assume, by the Father. Elsewhere, though Christ is lauded, it is sometimes in negative terms. In "L'Examen de minuit," Jesus is seen only as the least contestable of all the gods. "Le Châtiment de l'orgueil"

depicts Him as having attained such an elevated status due to the efforts of prideful and egotistical sermonizers. The Christ of "Le Reniement de saint Pierre" is reminiscent of Vigny's Christ in "Le Mont des Oliviers"; He becomes the dupe of a divinity whose laughter resounds from the heavens as the nails penetrate the innocent flesh of the would-be victim of mankind. Christ is thus reduced to a missionary of humanitarian utopianism, a concept which the poet of Les Fleurs du Mal thoroughly discredits as being so much idle dreaming; for, in this world of anguish and remorse, "actions and dreams are not sisters," as he puts it succinctly and pessimistically in the final stanza of "Le Reniement de saint Pierre."

## IV

The mechanics of the Baudelairean universe are unlike those found in the works of any other metaphysical poet. They emanate from a multiplicity of sources, including Judeo-Christian tradition, as we have seen; and they also share traits common to several formal philosophies, a number of so-called mystery religions, and certain notions of the occult which experienced a renewed popularity among the intellectuals of nineteenth-century France. The imperfect deity, whose presence we have already noted and whose attributes are reminiscent of the Demiurge of Zoroastrian or Gnostic tradition, is responsible only in part for the metaphysical pessimism which permeates Les Fleurs du Mal. There is also a Godhead, of similar origin, which remains remote and transmundane, excluding even mystical approximation. The "Démon" of "La Destruction," for example, which inhabits the poet's very body and fills him with eternal desire and culpability, leads him into tenebrous realms where even the transmundane vision of the Godhead cannot penetrate. This descent, evident also in "Le Gouffre," is accompanied by the continuing withdrawal of

of the Godhead, says the poet of "Le Coucher du soleil romantique":

Mais je poursuis en vain le Dieu qui se retire;  
L'Irrisistible Nuit établit son empire,  
Noire, humide, funeste et pleine de frissons.

Such are the centrifugal mechanics of the Baudelairean universe, a postulation which would no doubt interest modern scientists who subscribe to the big bang theory and that of a constantly expanding universe. Within this cosmos, which precludes any return to the source (the primary tenet of all religion), there is, however, a superior being accessible to all mankind: Satan. Yet this Satan is no less multifaceted than the God image in Les Fleurs du Mal. Whether it is a question of the proper noun "Diable" or "Satan," the attributes ascribed to this creature are often contradictory and, at first encounter, mystifying indeed. In "Au lecteur," the preface poem of the work, a curious "Satan Trismegistus" is presented as the immediate source of ontological evil within the spatiotemporal sphere; it is he who enacts the descent toward Hell, compelling mankind to traverse the repugnant realms of "stinking darkness"; it is he who dashes all hope in "L'Irréparable" and represents perniciously the eternal damnation of man in "L'Irrémédiable":

--Emblèmes nets, tableau parfait  
D'une fortune irrémédiable,  
Qui donne à penser que le Diable  
Fait toujours bien ce qu'il fait!

This Satan is as unique as the Baudelairean universe itself; for elsewhere he is seen as man's sole consolation. In "Les Litanies de Satan" he becomes the adoptive father of those who have unjustly incurred the wrath of God; he replaces Christ as the expositor of paradise and beatitude. Satan himself, like man, is also an innocent victim of a

capricious God; hence, there exists between him and mankind a common bond which makes of him the "Prince of exile," the "healer of human anguish," the "inventor's lamp" so important to the creative mind of the poet and his kind. Indeed, the Satan of Les Fleurs du Mal engenders an archetype, that of Baudelaire's notion of the homo duplex, the notion of man's innocent and irrevocable exclusion from the divine order and the fall into spatiotemporal materiality.<sup>5</sup> As a "fallen god," Satan recalls the precosmic order; as a witness of creation, that is to say of the embodiment of evil, he knows all the secrets of the cosmos. As such, he is the poet's Lucifer; his strange light which, ironically, is created from darkness, shines forth as the inventor's lamp, the poet's beacon, in futile reminiscence of the pure light and complete unity of the precosmic universe. This light, as impure as it may be, is the only luminiscence accessible to a condemned mankind. The poet of "L'Irrémédiable" tells us so without equivocation:

Un phare ironique, infernal,  
 Flambeau des grâces sataniques,  
 Soulagement et gloire uniques,  
 --La conscience dans le Mal!

V

It is of course undeniable that a strong religious current permeates Les Fleurs du Mal. From "Au lecteur" to the final poem of the 1861 edition, "Le Voyage," the reader is constantly reminded that the poet's drama--that of his own existence--takes place against a backdrop of forces which transcend his relations with the Venuses of his life, his dealings with the throngs of the capital, his observation of the metamorphosis of Paris into a modern megalopolis. Close scrutiny of the onomastic references to these forces lends definition to the religious perspective

of the work. These references are found in all sections of the book, rather than exclusively in the "Révolte" section which has attracted so much critical attention. They complement the admixture of religious and secular vocabulary, a romantic trait, in such a way as to give primary direction to the work. Their syncretistical and heterodoxical character is reinforced both by their disposition in the work and by their number; for it is interesting to note that of all the onomastic designations of Les Fleurs du Mal the proper nouns relative to God, Christ, and Satan are, individually and collectively, more numerous than those of any other description. Whereas other onomastic appellations make integral contributions to Baudelaire's poetry and assist him in conveying various other notions (exoticism, the unchanging status of mankind throughout the ages, the preeminence of art, modernism and antique heritage, love and death), an understanding of the onomastics of religion in Les Fleurs du Mal is essential to a sophisticated appreciation of this masterpiece of French literature.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Baudelaire's own analysis of this stylistic phenomenon is at once penetrating and revealing. In Paradis artificiels ("Le poème du haschisch"), he characterizes succinctly and captivately the function of various parts of speech in his visionary poetry: "La grammaire, l'aride grammaire elle-même, devient quelque chose comme une sorcellerie évocatoire; les mots ressuscitent revêtus de chair et os, le substantif dans sa majesté substantielle, l'adjectif, vêtement transparent qui l'habille et le colore comme un glacié, et le verbe, ange du mouvement, qui donne le branle à la phrase." Oeuvres complètes, 2 Vols., ed. Claude Pichois (Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1975-76), I, 431.

<sup>2</sup> Jean-Pierre Richard, Poésie et Profondeur (Paris: Seuil, 1965). See especially pages 161-162 of the chapter entitled "Profondeur de Baudelaire." Richard contrasts Baudelaire's use of the substantive to Rimbaud's use of the verb in the chapter "Rimbaud ou la poésie du devenir."

<sup>3</sup> See Jules Barbey d'Aurevilly, "Article justificatif pour Charles Baudelaire," in Charles Baudelaire, Oeuvres complètes (Paris: Calmann Lévy, 1892), I, 376.

<sup>4</sup> This and all subsequent verses of Les Fleurs du Mal have been taken from the Pichois edition of Oeuvres complètes.

<sup>5</sup> See Oeuvres complètes, ed. Claude Pichois, II, 1125, n. 1.