

Baudelaire and Prince Hamlet

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“Le poète des Fleurs du Mal, qui fut avec Delacroix et Berlioz un des trois grands shakespeareiens de ce siècle, vient directement de Shakespeare, ou, pour mieux dire, de l’Hamlet de Shakespeare.”

Théodore de Banville⁽¹⁾

There is a story which Baudelaire is reported to have told to his literary friends, Banville among them, in the Latin Quarter of Paris. It concerns the wedding-night of his mother and stepfather, when the poet was but seven years old. He had been particularly close to his mother since the death of his natural father about eighteen months previous to the second marriage, so it ought, perhaps, to occasion no great measure of surprise or even interest that he should have harboured feelings of jealousy towards his stepfather—the jealousy, one supposes, of the first-born child who finds his prerogative of attention and affection usurped by a new-born brother or sister. Our poet, however, to whom surprise and the confounding of common supposition were as a life-blood, to whom Sainte-Beuve once offered the advice, “Ne craignez pas tant de sentir comme les autres”, told his friends of how, having been sent up to bed by his stepfather on the night of the wedding, he locked the door of the nuptial bedchamber and disposed of the key, so preventing for a short while the consummation of the marriage.

If the tale is curious, its implications are yet more so. Its tone of schoolboy bravado need not incline us to question its authenticity, even

(1) Introduction to the 1867 edition of “Les Fleurs du Mal”, ed. Banville, Charles Asselineau and Michel Lévy.

if we do begin to wonder whether Baudelaire might not have been rather pleased to be in the position of telling such a tale; indeed, if the innocence of a naughty defiance of parental authority were all that it involved, it would scarcely deserve even a mention. The reason why it deserves more than that is also the reason why its truth must be doubted: the little act of heroism which it describes is almost insultingly precocious, depending for its dramatic impact—and it is very much concerned with making a dramatic impact—on our awareness, on the awareness of the Latin Quarter set to whom the story was originally told, of its specifically and knowingly sexual motivation. The intrusion of the discriminating, determinedly prejudiced adult mind into what must have been a poignant and bewildering crisis for the young child is conspicuous in the extreme.

If the story is a mere fabrication, which seems to me very likely indeed, one must wonder about the sort of spirit in which it was composed; those psycho-analytic critics who, by taking for granted the authenticity of such stories, have tried to make of Baudelaire's life and work a Freudian testcase, may be too easily dismissed if we do not at first recognize that Baudelaire himself was rather attracted to the sort of conclusive account which they have struggled to formulate. If the mere fact of the usurpation of Baudelaire's place in his mother's affections by his stepfather is a standing provocation to such critics, so was it to Baudelaire himself; the attribution of its sexual significance which is set down in the tale of the locked bedroom and the disappointed newly-weds derives from the same sort of formulaic pre-conception of design which characterizes a number of biographies of the poet—the pre-conception of a determination to invest with a certain value a given series of events to which such a value may, to a truly disinterested observer, appear if not extrinsic, at least peripheral. That determined power of attribution is the instrument of Baudelaire's sense of identity with Prince Hamlet.

It may be that in respect of his fascination with Hamlet we will feel disposed to allow the youthful Baudelaire his pre-conceptions in reflect-

ing on his early years, for the circumstances of his boyhood and adolescence and the kind of attitudes and feelings which they provoked correspond with tempting exactitude to the circumstances and sensibility of Shakespeare's prince: the sense of personal betrayal and moral disgust whenever the thought arose of his mother's o'er hasty second marriage; the intense dislike of his stepfather; his stepfather's finally sending him away to sea, having spared him more drastic punishment for his obstreperousness because of the continued depth of his mother's affection for him⁽¹⁾. In themselves, of course, these resemblances, although remarkable, mean nothing. What is important is Baudelaire's attitude towards them, the way they became imprinted on his consciousness and so established a far wider range of reference and significance within his work than might at first seem possible. The kind of significance I have in mind is to be found in a passage by Jules Buisson, one of the poet's Latin Quarter set, who set down a number of revealing observations about his friend, the best known of which is the following:—

“Baudelaire était une âme très délicate, très fine, originale et tendre, qui s'était fêlée au premier choc de la vie. Il y avait, dans son existence, un évènement qu'il n'avait pu supporter: le second mariage de sa mère. Sur ce sujet, il était inépuisable et sa terrible logique se résumait toujours ainsi: ‘Quand on a un fils comme moi—comme moi était sous—entendu—on ne se remarie pas.’”

Buisson's writing has the descriptive indulgence of a man forcibly impressed by a certain emotional indulgence on the part of his friend. The passage registers—inadvertently, one supposes—a distinct and pleasurable consciousness of being “très délicate, très fine, originale et tendre”, an awareness that to be damaged irreparably by one's first collision with the harsh realities is to be one man picked out of ten thousand; in this respect it is concerned with the growth in Baudelaire of conception out of

(1) “Hamlet”, 4,7,11-16: “The queen his mother/Lives almost by his looks...”

perception, of a certain way of regarding himself in the light of a number of events, attitudes and feelings which, although they might give rise to the conception, are not fully adequate to it. It should, for example, be noted how frequent, long and affectionate are Baudelaire's letters to both his mother and stepfather during the very period of time (1839-1841) when Buisson was finding out how irremediably flawed his friend's soul had been by that second marriage. The temptation to infer outright enmity from the manifest differences in character, outlook and temperament between the aspiring young poet and the emphatically orthodox, authoritarian stepfather (Jacques Aupick was an army captain when he married Baudelaire's mother) must have been as powerful for Baudelaire as it has proved for his biographers; indeed, he puts the matter very tellingly and succinctly himself when he writes of Samuel Cramer, the hero of his autobiographical short story, "La Fanfarlo", "Il jouait pour lui-même et à huis-clos d'incomparables tragédies, ou, pour mieux dire, tragi-comédies".⁽¹⁾ In the light of those remarkable resemblances between his own life and that of Hamlet, it is clear exactly whose tragedy he believed he was not so much acting as living.

What I am concerned to do in this essay is to offer an account of the poetry in which Baudelaire sought to fulfil his conception of the role in which he had cast himself. My choice of poems is limited, but by space rather than availability, for, as I have already intimated, Baudelaire's fascination with Hamlet has both a range and a depth of significance in his poetry considerably greater than would be suggested merely by the pursuit of specific allusions to Shakespeare's play. I do not propose to exclude such allusions from the discussion, for to do so would be to dispense with a valuable means of persuasion, but they are best confined to a supporting role of confirmation; the operations of a Hamlet-like sensibility and the aspiration towards it ought to be sufficiently evident

(1) "La Fanfarlo", *Oeuvres Complètes*, Volume 1, p. 554 in the Gallimard edition, ed. Pichois.

even in their absence.

I want to begin—rather unpromisingly, perhaps—by seeming to digress. Banville has left us the following description of his friend and fellow poet's room at the Hotel Pimôdan, where Baudelaire had settled following his return to Paris from his voyage to Calcutta:—

“There were no pictures except the complete set of Delacroix's ‘Hamlet’, unframed, and nailed to the wall, and a painted head, in which the same Delacroix had symbolized Grief... Baudelaire lived with Hamlet, that is to say with another self; and, with the accents of a wounded swan, he sang his mysterious grief”.⁽¹⁾

We may dwell with some profit on the Delacroix sketches from “Hamlet”, not simply because it was in the very room which Banville describes that the composition of “Les Fleurs du Mal” was begun, but because they suggest strongly where in the enormous range offered by Shakespeare's prince Baudelaire's particular interest lay. A useful point of discussion is a study of Hamlet beholding Yorick's skull, “Hamlet et Horatio”, which is to be found in Raymond Escholier's critical edition of Delacroix. Escholier reports that the painter used a young woman, Juliette Pierret, to model the character of Hamlet in all the sketches, and there is certainly an insistence on a peculiarly feminine sort of delicacy and tenderness in this piece: the fine clothes, slender limbs, aquiline features and, above all, the long, slim hands with ringed fingers, describe a prince who would rather stand aside and contemplate the grave than fight in it with Laertes (which in itself is a tribute to the range and consequent elusiveness of Shakespeare's conception). Horatio, stout and bearded, proclaims a kind of mature, worldly wisdom, whereas for Hamlet the only object of concern is Yorick's skull; the steady gaze which Delacroix has captured so successfully is at once fearfully intense

(1) Theodore de Banville, “*Souvenirs*” (no French versia version available). Extract from Penguin anthology of Baudelaire, introduced and edited by Joanna Richardson.

and carelessly abstracted. But what must have appealed to Baudelaire as much as anything in the painting is the studied elegance with which Hamlet draws up about his knees that fine inky cloak of his in order to prevent the mud from spoiling it. Delacroix saw in Hamlet an aristocrat of sensibility who was correspondingly an aristocrat of demeanour and apparel, and that correspondence is central to Baudelaire's creative pre-occupation with Shakespeare's prince. I should therefore like, before launching into the poetry, to extend these few prefatory observations by looking briefly at what I find a most lucid and perceptive description of the kind of relation of demeanour to sensibility which I have in mind. It is a passage by Dickens concerning the effect on a young boy of his mother's death:—

“I am sensible of having felt that a dignity attached to me among the rest of the boys, and that I was important in my affliction.

“If ever a child were stricken with sincere grief, I was. But I remember that this importance was a kind of satisfaction to me, when I walked in the playground that afternoon while the boys were in school. When I saw them glancing at me out of the windows, as they went up to their classes, I felt distinguished, and looked more melancholy, and walked slower. When school was over, and they came out and spoke to me, I felt it rather good in myself not to be proud to any of them, and to take exactly the same notice of them all, as before”.⁽¹⁾

The passage is complex and penetrating in its registration; it is not simply concerned with the feeling of superiority which is habitually provoked by suffering—in this case, the superiority of the spirit which can cope with and even transcend the misery of circumstances—but with the consequently paradoxical attitude of the afflicted towards the affliction. The death of David Copperfield's mother, fundamentally a predator on David's contentment, comes indirectly to be a provider of contentment

(1) “David Copperfield”, Chapter 9

in the face of the grief for which it alone is responsible; David's consciousness of his dignity in the eyes of others leads him to exaggerate the habits of his demeanour in order to enhance the reputation of his sensibility, for the greater the apparent misery, the greater the spirit that can be seen to be tackling it. Now, while it is certainly true to say that there is nothing essentially false about David's little performance (Dickens is at pains to exclude completely that possibility), that it is not insincere posturing but the sign of an ostentatious pride in his very capacity for sincere feeling, it is also true to say that an inseparable feature of that inclination to convince others of his dignity is an inclination to convince himself of it, for Dickens quite unmistakably encourages us to see that David is both a performer and an onlooker. There are two audiences in the passage: the boys who peer through the schoolroom windows, and David himself, the latter observing the relation of the grief-stricken orphan to the former. Consider, for example, the delightfully ironic betrayal of secret pride in the sentence, "I felt it rather good in myself not to be proud to any of them", in which the boy so relishes the solemn spectacle of himself (a line like that ought not to be allowed to pass without some comment being made on the command of language, the marvelous sureness of touch which allowed Dickens to superimpose the comments of the adult over those of the boy commenting on himself). I will refer back to this very rich passage and the many ideas it suggests during the course of this essay, for I can hardly be said to have exhausted it with the few words I have spent on it. For the moment it is sufficient to say that its main strength is to show that what we rather hastily call exhibitionism and play-acting are far from being incompatible with sincere feeling; the slow walk and the melancholy countenance are actions which any man might play who had that within which passed show, be he schoolboy, prince, or poet.

The wisdom of Dickens can easily and profitably be brought to a reading of Baudelaire's poem "La Béatrice", which addresses itself speci-

fically to the princely aspirations of its author, (although in this case, of course, the malaise of the protagonist is that of the exile, the man whose consciousness of his fineness of sensibility has led him to be cast out rather than exalted). The poet's status as exile and his sense of identity with Hamlet are represented as being one and the same thing, and the terms of the exile, the exact nature of that sense of identity, brought into question, the following being offered, it seems, as a challenging criticism:—

“Contemplons a loisir cette caricature
 Et cette ombre d'Hamlet imitant sa posture,
 Le regard indécis et les cheveux au vent.
 N'est-ce pas grand' pitié de voir ce bon vivant,
 Ce gueux, cet histrion en vacances, ce drôle....?”

But Baudelaire seems quite ready simply to sweep away the accusation of mere role-playing with the gesture of patrician contempt threatened by the lines,

“J'aurais pu (mon orgueil aussi haut que les monts
 Domine la nuée et le cri des démons)
 Détourner simplement ma tête souveraine....”

There is a problem of interpretation here. Many have thought, in view of what happens in the third stanza of the poem, that these lines were intended ironically, that Baudelaire recognised the truth of the accusation and ridiculed himself by confirming it with that overtly theatrical gesture, the turning away of the head. Such an interpretation seems to me reductive; although the ‘détournement simple’, in all its pre-conceived, theatrical appropriateness, positively rings with the defiant affirmation, “This is I, Hamlet the Dane”, and so, in one respect, confirms the accusation, in its exhibition of what I find to be a superb indifference to the misery of the situation described by the poem it offers unmistakable proof of the sort of spiritual distinction which those “démons vicieux” plainly do not recognise in the poet. To object that the intention to make the gesture is eventually undermined is to overlook the essential

power of that use of the conditional perfect, “J’aurais pu”, which points to a strength of self-confidence sufficient to convince us that the force of the gesture lies as much in the conception as the enactment. Of course it is not simply ‘superb indifference’, but a calculated display of indifference; it is in the measure of calculation that we may begin to perceive the complexity of Baudelaire’s attitude towards his sense of identity with Hamlet. Just as David Copperfield beings to enjoy and consequently to manipulate and enhance the spectacle of himself maintaining that relation to his fellow pupils which assures him of his distinction, so Baudelaire observes and adjusts his gestures with the studious care of which the ‘détournement’ quite clearly speaks in order to maintain that relation to the “démon” which justifies his sense of himself as ‘l’homme supérieur’, Hamlet. The gesture, in its obvious theatricality, may seem to confirm the taunt of “Cette ombre d’Hamlet imitant sa posture”, but only in the eyes of those by whom Baudelaire seeks to be misunderstood, from whom he must defend the knowledge of the greater truth, the spiritual distinction which is his as it is Hamlet’s. It therefore implies not merely a contempt for those who would challenge his conception of his distinction, but a latent and, one suspects, partly unacknowledged dependence on them for that conception. Sartre makes the essential point with great clarity in a passage which I will refer back to later:—

“La révolutionnaire veut changer le monde, il le dépasse vers l’avenir, vers un ordre de valeurs qu’il invente; le révolté a soin de maintenir intacts les abus dont il souffre pour pouvoir se révolter contre eux.... Il ne veut ni détruire, ni dépasser, mais seulement se dresser contre le monde”.⁽¹⁾ “La Béatrice” shows that whatever Baudelaire’s attitude towards the actual world, he finds what he regards as his real identity, his true Hamlet-like self, mirrored in his intercourse with it; it also shows that that identity must remain misunderstood by the actual world if it is

(1) Jean-Paul Sartre, “Baudelaire”, Gallimard, 1947, p. 61

to remain at all. In both respects we can see the possibility of an inter-relation between Baudelaire's fascination with Hamlet and his dandyism, which I will come to shortly.

Before doing so, I should like to draw some general observations out of my reading of "La Béatrice" concerning the wider applications of Baudelaire's sense of identity with Hamlet as it reveals itself in that poem. A useful provocation to thought is T.S. Eliot's statement, in the first of his essays on the poet, of his sense of what is involved in what he calls Baudelaire's "romantic detritus": "Either because he cannot adjust himself to the actual world he has to reject it in favour of Heaven and Hell, or because he has the perception of Heaven and Hell he rejects the present world: both ways of putting it are tenable".⁽¹⁾ Baudelaire's suffering is certainly both provident and predatory, but that is no reason to assume that it is the kind of chicken-and-egg problem which Eliot wants to make of it. "Both ways of putting it" may be tenable, but neither is as independently sufficient, as exclusive of the other, as he implies. The struggle towards the spiritual life, which Eliot defines in explicitly theological terms but which certainly has equal reference to the sense of identity with Hamlet, is not simply a struggle to reject the actual world but to accommodate a realisation of its unpleasantness to a sense of that greater, spiritual life (and vice versa, in the poems of profound despair and pessimism). The fruit of the struggle, as embodied in Baudelaire's finest poems ("Le Cygne", for example, which I will discuss towards the end of this essay), is the exploration and recognition not of the victory of the spiritual over the actual, but of their true inter-relatedness. Indeed, it is central to my purpose that we see that it is when Baudelaire attempts to convince us of the possibility of such a victory that he fails most conspicuously, for that is when his sense of the spiritual life degenerates into a narrow, blinkered egotism, a determina-

(1) T.S. Eliot, "*Baudelaire*" (1930) in "Selected Essays".

tion to stand in studied contradistinction to the actual world without acknowledging the reality of his wretchedness in it. In "La Béatrice"—and this is my central point—it is at the very moment when that victory of spiritual over actual seems most imminent, when the egotism attending on the attempt is at its most self-regarding, that Baudelaire's sense of identity with Hamlet is at its most resolute ("mon orgueil aussi haut que les monts/Domine la nuée et le cri des démons"). The means by which that resolution is thwarted is represented, in the third stanza, as the interruption of a self-pride, a sense of entire sufficiency, by the promptings of natural feeling, of the kind of undeniable actuality which the second line of the poem, "Comme je me plaignais un jour à la nature", implies it is in the nature of Baudelaire's conception of himself to attempt to deny: such is certainly the effect of that deliberate contrasting of "ma tête souveraine" with "la reine de mon coeur". That sense of self-sufficiency will receive further consideration when we come to look at Baudelaire's dandyism; for the moment it is important to note how, in "La Béatrice", his sense of identity with Hamlet reveals itself as a peculiarly self-protective kind of obsession, asserting itself partly as a defence against, and wholly at the expense of, a proper recognition of pertinent actualities. In the struggle towards the spiritual life, the struggle to accommodate spleen to ideal, the ideal is consistently called upon as a means of evasion or deflection, and it is at such times that the poet's fascination with Hamlet is at its most powerful and certainly at its most visible. It is the nature of the evasion, of the obsessive idealism, which I now propose to consider by looking at the relation of Baudelaire's sense of identity with Hamlet to his dandyism.

I find that the question may best be taken up by referring once again to the passage from "David Copperfield" which I have discussed briefly, and in which, I suggested, the boy maintains through a scrupulous self-consciousness that relation to his school-mates which satisfies and assures him of his sense of his superiority over them. Such are the means

and the end of dandyism as Baudelaire conceived of it; in one of the "Journaux Intimes", "Mon Coeur Mis à Nu", he writes, "Le Dandy doit aspirer à être sublime sans interruption, il doit vivre et dormir devant un miroir". It is clearly essential to realise that Baudelaire's dandyism is not merely a narcissistic cult of the wardrobe and the toilet but a means of asserting his individuality, his indissoluble separation from and concomitant superiority over the mass of humanity. In "L'Art Romantique" he writes, "Le mot dandy implique une quintessence de caractère et une intelligence subtile de tout le mécanisme moral du monde.... Un dandy peut être un homme blasé, peut être un homme souffrant.... Un dandy ne peut jamais être un homme vulgaire". We are reminded straight away of the conclusion of "La Béatrice", of that subversion of the effort to establish a quintessential, Hamlet-like identity by the claim of natural—that is to say, in Baudelaire's terms, vulgar—attachment. A poem which deals perhaps more directly with this striving after a complete, self-contained purity through a maximum of artifice is "La Beauté". Consider, for example, the following:—

"Je trône dans l'azur comme un sphinx incompris;
 J'unis un coeur 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".

Although the poem deals ostensibly with the classical ideal of artistic perfection, of beauty itself, its presentation of that ideal seems to me to bear very interestingly and significantly on Baudelaire's dandyism; one notes, for example, the meticulousness with which the pose is studied and solidified ("Je hais le mouvement qui déplace les lignes"), and, — course, the degree to which such solidification debars the involuntary interruptions of nature ("jamais je ne pleure et jamais je ne ris"). But what is most revealing about the poem is the relation which it argues between the impenetrability of the sphinx-like attitude and the hatred of "le mouvement qui déplace les lignes", for those "grandes attitudes"

which so mystify the poets to whom Baudelaire refers both externalize and conceal the inner spiritual quality whose unfathomableness the poem celebrates. When Baudelaire writes, "Et jamais je ne pleure et jamais je ne ris" (exploiting marvellously the steady sonority of the alexandrine and achieving a remarkable effect of onomatopoeia which is certainly untranslatable), he registers not only the impenetrable self-command of what would in card-playing circles be called a poker-face, but the perfect manifestation of the kind of serene state of consciousness which is not to be surprised by the involuntary natural impulses which are the signs of vulgarity—"Un dandy peut être un homme blasé", as he says in "L'Art Romantique". It is that sublime stoicism which he attempts in "La Béatrice", and which represents the ideal of his dandyism, for to attain such a state of consciousness is to be free from the claims of vulgarity, of universal nature; more importantly, perhaps, it is to be so far beyond the reach of those claims as to be incomprehensible to those who endure them.

With that we must turn to "Hamlet", and to a famous speech which is positively exhilarating (and so it must have been for Baudelaire and Delacroix alike) in its treatment of precisely that sort of studied impenetrability which characterises Baudelaire's quest for a kind of spiritual purity in the world:—

"Seems, madam! nay it is, I know not seems.
 'Tis not alone mine inky cloak, — motner,
 Nor customary suits of solemn black,
 Nor windy suspiration of forces preath,
 No, nor the fruitful river in the eye,
 Nor the dejected haviour of the visage,
 Together with all forms, modes, shapes of grief,
 That can denote me only. These indeed seem,
 For they actions that a man might play,
 But I have that within which passes show,

These but the trappings and the suits of woe”.

(I, 2, 76-86)

It does seem to me that this speech must have made a considerable impression on Delacroix when he was painting his sketches from “Hamlet”, so concerned is he—as we have already observed in “Hamlet et Horatio”—with representing Hamlet’s spiritual distinction in terms of a distinction of demeanour and apparel. Hamlet’s itemising of the shapes of grief is clearly not simply a reminder to Claudius and Gertrude of their rather slapdash approach to the mourning of his father; it is a detailed account of the sort of dejected behaviour they can expect of him as long as he continues to wear the inky cloak which has excited Gertrude’s concern. For Hamlet is determined to be seen to be standing apart from the hypocrisy he finds around him, and to preserve with studious care that continuity of appearance and reality which has been so violently ruptured by his mother’s o’er-hasty second marriage; the donning of the inky cloak and the performance of the shapes of grief represent a way of clinging to his sense of that within which passes show in the presence of those whose grief has, as far as he can see, been all show. They are, in that respect, the instruments of his sense of spiritual hygiene, the need to assert and observe to the utmost extent his distinction from the moral depravity of Elsinore. In that assertion there is, moreover, to be found the very same paradox which is so important a feature of Baudelaire’s dandyism: the trappings and the suits of woe both exhibit and conceal the secret, impenetrable life of the superior spirit. Consider, for example, the way in which poor Gertrude falls right into the little trap which Hamlet has set for her when, prompting the speech I have just quoted, she asks her son that awful blunder of a question, “Why seems it so particular with thee?” It is part of Hamlet’s intention in donning the inky cloak to satisfy himself and to show his mother that she, in her treacherous shallowness, is quite incapable of understanding that a sadness as apparently grave as his can possibly be as bad as it looks, that it can really

be anything more than the boyish quirks of unmanly grief. And, indeed, she cannot, in her philosophy, dream that it could be so; she is as far from understanding that within Hamlet which passes show as those poets in "La Beauté" are from penetrating the inscrutable attitudes of the sphinx-like narrator, despite the fact that it is effectively staring her in the face. Such, of course, is the ambivalence registered in the 'détournement' of "La Béatrice", the assertion of that within which passes show being made in terms of the mere "show" which it surpasses, or, at least, is intended to surpass. The speech clearly reveals in Hamlet a certain pride in his own capacity for sincere feeling much like that of David Copperfield, and it is a pride which is rendered with the exhilarating effect of which I have written above: "But I have that within which passes show". It gains its power to move, of course, from our perception of Hamlet's relation to those around him: its heart-warming heroism has to do with his determination to stand alone and uncorrupted—and therefore misunderstood—in the very midst of corruption, to cling defiantly to a basic sincerity from which everyone else has fallen. To give it a rather broader context, it involves the same kind of courageous assertion of a pure, essential individuality that we get in the magnificent lines of Hamlet to Guildenstern,

"Why, look you now, how unworthy a thing you make of me! you would play upon me, you would seem to know my stops, you would pluck out the heart of my mystery, you would sound me from my lowest note to the top of my compass—and there is much music, excellent voice, in this little organ, yet cannot you make it speak. 'Sblood, do you think I am easier to be played on than a pipe? Cell me what instrument you will, though you can fret me, you cannot play upon me". (III, 2, 366–'74). The full appeal to Baudelaire of that kind of assertion I will discuss later; for the moment, having established the nature, if not the profundity, of the attraction, we ought to consider the negative registration which is at work in that "inky cloak" speech, for that, too, bears

interestingly on the French poet.

I have said that the sense of pride which the speech renders gains its power to move from our perception of Hamlet's relation to those around him; if we consider Hamlet's own perception of that relation we may begin to regard the speech in a different light. It is not necessarily that we suspect him of clinging to the shapes of grief when the substance has gone, although we might well be inclined to do so given the facility with which the memory of his father's ghost slips from his mind, but that we question the kind of self-attentiveness with which he goes to meet the corruption he finds around him; Hamlet's pride in his act of studied self-preservation, in his decision to continue to array himself with the shapes of grief, tells of an unspoken satisfaction with the role which such studiousness has granted him in his relations with his mother and step-father, that of an observed moral superiority. Such a satisfaction hints at a conscience outraged but self-thwarting, self-paralyzing because self-regarding. Something, perhaps, of Sartre's conception of rebelliousness is at work in the lower reaches of his mind, although I would not wish to indulge in the blatant ludicrousness of pursuing that conception through all that we know of Hamlet's behaviour, or even through the whole of this one scene. Nevertheless, the value of such a conception to a full understanding of what Shakespeare is telling us about his Prince of Denmark during that speech ought not to be under-estimated. In the speech we can appreciate much that is characteristically (and irresistibly) alluring about Hamlet and much that is characteristically weak; we can also appreciate the extreme fineness of the dividing-line between the two. But beyond that, it can show, with reference both to certain poems of Baudelaire's and, to a more limited extent, to that conception of Sartre's, how faithfully Baudelaire the exile, the dandy, the would-be prince inherited from his fascination with Hamlet both the characteristic allurements and the characteristic weakness of Shakespeare's prince and transmitted them into his own poetry (I am thinking not only of the early

reaches of "Spleen et Idéal", of poems such as "Bénédiction", "Élévation", and those which I have been looking at, but of, for example, "Révolte" and the poet's flirtations with Satanism).

I have suggested that Baudelaire's sense of identity with Hamlet ought to be considered, when we attempt to trace it through his poetry, in terms of a means of evading pertinent actualities, of the way in which an obsessive egotism, an inflexibility of conception concerning its relation to such actualities, asserts itself at the expense of proper intelligence. I now want to consider a poem in which that inflexibility is thoroughly challenged, in which Baudelaire commits himself to engage with the outer world in the fulness of its own terms, and not on his, "L'Albatros".

"L'Albatros" embodies the nature of that engagement in a metaphor whose initial appeal is considerable: the great sea-bird whose "ailes de géant l'empêchent de marcher", the creature not of this world, made to soar and not to plod. The attraction of the metaphor is re-doubled if we come to the poem from the shrill rhetoric of the poems which precede it in the anthology, "Au Lecteur" and "Bénédiction". But as soon as one begins to pursue the metaphor in the way the poem clearly requires that it should be pursued, a number of significant problems arise, problems which, I suggest, are not simply to do with the failure to find a proper 'objective correlative' (indeed, it may be more proper than Baudelaire himself imagined), but with a certain tension which inheres in the poet's sense of himself as the exile, 'l'homme supérieur', Prince Hamlet. It is a tension which arises from an obstacle which, given the terms of his engagement with the outer world, is fundamental and irreducible: he wants to claim superiority for himself as the poet who, not having been made for this world, nevertheless finds himself in it and having to endure it on its own terms, under which the justification for his sense of otherworldly superiority is negated by being made merely ridiculous. In poetic terms this means that Baudelaire wants to acclaim the albatross because of its capacity for soaring flight while at the same time showing

(because of the very nature of the metaphorical reference) that it is irresistibly drawn to the ships on which it cannot be anything but an absurd misfit, on which the giant's wings that make it so magnificent in flight are simply an impediment, a source of vulgar amusement. At the heart of Baudelaire's difficulty is his uncertainty over his status in the poem, over what should be his true element as "le prince des nuées". If I can put the matter in the terms in which I questioned T.S. Eliot's conception of Baudelaire's romantic detritus, it is the very egotism that insists on the absolute division of the spiritual from the actual life postulated in the final stanza of the poem which prevents him from locating a notion of spiritual superiority in his evocation of worldly misery, with the result that the mere desolation of his necessarily earthbound existence is offered as a sign of transcendence. The last stanza, and in particular the lines,

"Le Poète est semblable au prince des nuées

Qui hante la tempête et se rit de l'archer",

therefore constitutes a recoil from the acceptance of his desolation, for in it he calls on that obsessive sense of the spiritual life which is the antithesis of real awareness to fortify him; at the centre of that obsession is his sense of community with the highest spirits, and in particular with Hamlet. By informing us of his similarity with "le prince des nuées", Baudelaire clearly does not think himself alone in wishing to be free from the constraints of his earthly element, so to be able to laugh at the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune (that, perhaps, is dishonest, the obvious reference for "se rit de l'archer" being "The Ancient Mariner", but even if we dismiss altogether the Shakespearean reference my essential point is not in any way compromised).

The force and nature of the evasion, of the fortification, is emphasised by the poet's partial realisation of the true extent of his desolation in the actual world. Consider, for example, the third stanza:—

"Ce voyageur ailé, comme il est gauche et vaeule!

Lui, naguère si beau, qu'il est comique et laid!
L'un agace son bec avec un brûle-gueule,
L'autre mime, en boitant, l'infirme qui volait!"

It is of no small interest that this stanza is absent from the original version of the poem; it was composed when the second edition of "Les Fleurs du Mal" was being prepared. Baudelaire seems to have been prompted to write it by a friend, Charles Asselineau, who, in a letter to the poet dated February 26th, 1859, recommended the inclusion of a stanza "pour insister sur la gaucherie, du moins la gêne de l'albatros, pour faire tableau de son embarras". The insertion seems to me to be of twofold significance: not only does it violate Baudelaire's assertion of his other-worldly distinction by securing the terms of the metaphor more firmly in the actual world, as I have already explained; it also introduces a quality of proper disinterestedness which is announced by that tone of self-mockery such as we normally find only in his really fine, mature poems like "Le Goût du Néant" ("Couche-toi sans pudeur,/Vieux cheval dont le pied à chaque obstacle butte"), and such as we most certainly do not find anywhere else in "L'Albatros"—not in the second stanza, with its self-pitying sprinkling of emotive words like "honteux" and "piteusement", and not in the last, in which "Ses ailes de géant l'empêchent de marcher" is offered rather more as a cause for celebration than it ought to be under the circumstances. The introduction of such a quality of disinterestedness underlines the essentially self-thwarting nature of Baudelaire's assertion of his spiritual transcendence; his sense of the possibility of the spiritual life within the misery of the actual life becomes merely a struggle of two opposing and irreconcilable means of registration, the one tending towards a barefaced recognition of his wretchedness, the other bringing a formidable self-will to bear on that tendency in order to transform wretchedness into distinction. The failure of "L'Albatros" is therefore the failure of the poet to accommodate an undisguised recognition of the terms of his earthly element to his sense of the greater, other-worldly

purpose of "le prince des nuées"; it is with that that we find ourselves back very firmly with Hamlet.

In a famous passage in "Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship", Goethe identified the tragedy of Hamlet as "the effects of a great action laid upon a soul unfit for the performance of it", and implicit in that interpretation is a recognition of Hamlet's unfitness for the task of coming to terms with his destiny, with the very conditions and limitations of his own individual existence. It is Hamlet's irresistible sense of the very individuality of that existence, of his profound essential solitude, which, as I have suggested, most drew Baudelaire to him. In the matter of that essential appeal Baudelaire's attitude towards his own childhood is of the first importance; Sartre, for example, has some interesting comments on the effect on Baudelaire of his mother's second marriage, comments which transcend mere psychological speculation by being thoroughly corroborated by the poet's own writings:—

"Cette brusque rupture et le chagrin qui en est résulté l'ont jeté sans transition dans l'existence personnelle. Tout à l'heure il était tout pénétré par la vie unanime et religieuse du couple qu'il formait avec sa mère. Cette vie s'est retirée comme une marée, le laissant seul et sec, il a perdu ses justifications, il découvre dans la honte qu'il est un, que son existence lui est donnée pour rien".⁽¹⁾

Sartre takes his cue—although not, I think, the existentialist seasoning—from the following passage in "Mon Coeur Mis à Nu": "Sentiment de solitude dès mon enfance. Malgré la famille—et au milieu des camarades, surtout—sentiment de destinée éternellement solitaire"; as he points out, the fact that Baudelaire should refer to his isolation as a destiny implies an awareness of the need to come to terms with it, the way it bears on his relations with his family and friends, as something lasting and irrevocable (although he is prone to the occasional indulgence

(1) Sartre, *ibid.* p. 20

in the thoughts of what Sartre calls the suicides' club—compare, for example, Hamlet's dread of something after death with Baudelaire's poem "Obsession": "Comme tu me plairais, ô nuit! sans ces étoiles/Dont la lumière parle un langage connu!/Car je cherche le vide, et le noir, et le nu!/Mais les ténèbres sont ellesmêmes des toiles...."). We have already seen how, in "L'Albatros", Baudelaire is capable of evading the issue altogether by attempting to divorce his sense of the greater spiritual destiny from its necessarily worldly context. We have also seen how the means of evasion is represented as both an assertion of his distinction from the run of humanity and a claim to the right of community with those who share that distinction—such is the effect of Baudelaire's attempt to persuade us that he is like "le prince des nuées". Indeed, the same may be said of the 'détournement' in "La Béatrice", with its defiant assertion of something greater than mere role-playing, of a genuine sense of spiritual community with Hamlet (although, of course the devices of mere role-playing are never cast aside in the assertion of that which transcends them).

It is certainly the case that the entire history of Baudelaire's fascination with Hamlet is the history of a sense of fellowship, of shared experience and sensibility; that is precisely the reason why I have stressed the importance of a knowledge not only of the circumstances of the poet's youth but of the distorted perspective in which he viewed them in later life. To draw somewhat on Sartre, Baudelaire's interest in Hamlet can be understood as the natural concomitant of a feeling that he had suddenly been denied the possibility of community with the actual world, that the only person with whom he felt he could ever have been fully conversant (in the rich sense which Milton allows the word), his mother, had betrayed him and was therefore lost to him. The urge to transform that profoundly personal sense of betrayal into a kind of pseudo-impersonal moral revulsion was at times as deeply felt by Baudelaire as it always is by Hamlet; the mother figure in his poetry is consistently un-

pleasant, from the hysterical blasphemer of “Bénédiction” to the betrayer of the child’s very deepest instinctive attachment that we find in “La Lune Offensée”:

“Je vois ta mère enfant de ce siècle appauvri,
 Qui vers son miroir penche un lourd amas d’années,
 Et plâtre artistement le sein qui t’a nourri!”

The mother was once the giver of life to her son—now her only concern is to make attractive to other men the very instrument of that vital process. Cast out thus from all possibility of genuine human intercourse, with that sense of his “destinée éternellement solitaire”, Baudelaire sought his community with those who shared his destiny, and found it with Hamlet. Indeed, he might very easily have been describing the extent of Hamlet’s own isolation when, in that passage from “Mon Coeur Mis à Nu”, he writes, “Malgré la famille—et au milieu des camarades, surtout...”; we have already seen how he behaves with his mother and stepfather, but he is never quite as insidiously estranged and patronizing as when he is with his closest friend, Horatio. And I am sure that ‘insidiously’ is the right word, for there is unmistakably something calculated about his behaviour with Horatio, something which is closely related to what I have tried to identify as the characteristic allurements and the characteristic weakness not only of Hamlet but of the Baudelaire of those early poems of his which I have been looking at. The true measure and nature of that calculation may best be traced in that marvellously revealing and at least partly comic little scene between the two friends after Hamlet’s interview with his father’s ghost. It is a scene brimming with discreet condescension, for Hamlet is quite resolved that Horatio and Marcellus shall be kept at a certain distance from knowing all there is to know about the supernatural soliciting to which he alone has been privy:—

“I hold it fit that we shake hands and part,
 You, as your business and desire shall point you,

For every man hath business and desire..." (I, 5, 128-'30)

A rough paraphrase would be 'Mind your own business'. If, as Goethe claims, Hamlet is crushed beneath the weight of the "great action" which is forced upon him by fate ("The time is out of joint, O cursed spite, / That ever I was born to set it right!"), the sense of such a weight bearing down upon him is not entirely without its pleasures; from a social point of view, Hamlet is rather pleased to be the chosen one, and it is a pleasure which has to do with the kind of sensibility which informs that stirring rebuke to Gertrude, "But I have that within which passes show", the pleasure of an irresistibly ostentatious pride in his spiritual quality and the determination to preserve the sanctity of that quality. What Shakespeare captures so wonderfully in this one small scene is the streak of boyishness in Hamlet which makes him behave in such a way; his "No, you will reveal it" (119) suggests nothing so much as the act of a small boy snatching a treasured toy from the hands of a curious class-mate.

This account is, of course, reductive; there is also something far greater at work, the seeds of Hamlet's realisation that the task for which fate has just volunteered him is his or it is nobody's. But it is, in any case, the very inter-weaving of such different modes of registration which is what makes the scene so marvellously perceptive and so characteristically Shakespearean; indeed, it is the facility with which Shakespeare accommodates that kind of comic exuberance to a situation of such tragic import which is liable to deceive one as to the nature of what is being offered, for Hamlet's behaviour with Horatio can no more be dismissed as empty posturing than it can be acclaimed as divine condescension (although we know him to be quite capable of both those things). Instead, it is of the kind of activity which is described in that passage from "David Copperfield", for Hamlet's fixed, egotistic conception of his distinction, as manifested in his posturing, is founded on an originally honest perception of that distinction: the ghost has decided to speak to no one but him, and he takes no small pleasure in honouring the decision. At

this early stage of the play Hamlet goes to meet the task which fate has set him not merely, according to Goethe's interpretation, with a sense of his inadequacy to it, but with the thought very firmly in his mind that it has elevated him above the sphere of those trivial, fond records which he vows to wipe from his memory, beyond even the dreams of Horatio's philosophy; the way he spurns fundamentally the community offered by his friend in the self-congratulatory knowledge of its inadequacy to his present needs invests with more than a touch of self-aggrandisement his sense of the indissolubly individual foundation of his destiny.

It is in the continuity between that self-delighting solitude and the sense of the genuinely poignant, irrevocable sort that Hamlet most resembles Baudelaire; they both rather enjoy contemplating the idea of their profound isolation as long as they are among those whom they suppose ignorant of its true dimensions and significance (which takes us back, in essence, to Sartre's distinction between the rebel and the revolutionary and to the ambivalent attitude towards the malady associated with that distinction). For Baudelaire as, I think, often for Hamlet, it is the self-delighting, studied, social isolation which makes the truly profound sense of isolation endurable, even enjoyable, by portraying its blank wretchedness as a sign of superiority. It is interesting, for example, in view of what has been said about "La Beauté", that the "Spleen" poem beginning, "J'ai plus de souvenirs que si j'avais mille ans", should express the stark despair of that greater solitude in the image of "Un vieux sphinx ignoré du monde insoucieux", so emphasising the essential frailty of a sense of distinction which gains its *raison d'être* from the kind of studied maintenance of its relation to the actual world which I have been discussing throughout this essay. At the same time, of course, one can hardly under-estimate the effort which must have been involved in writing such a poem as "J'ai plus de souvenirs", the sheer courage in facing up to the image of utter helplessness which it presents; to put it the other way round, we cannot under-estimate the attraction of resting in the sense

of distinction afforded by the lesser, studied isolation of a poem like "La Beauté", or "L'Albatros". Yet it must be understood, finally, that the attraction is a fatal one. I have said that Baudelaire's principle failure in "L'Albatros" lies with his inability to decide on his status in the poem, on what is his true, native element. Now that inability seems to me to mark a corresponding failure to find his proper community, for he is too intent on the lesser, essentially self-aggrandising isolation to gain any depth of understanding of the greater, pre-destined isolation which draws him to "le prince des nuées", to Hamlet, and on which his entire sense of community depends. The attempt to find his community is based rather on a concentration than an extension of sympathy, on a principle of Narcissism rather than of fellowship; he finds the image of his own plight exalted to lofty, tragic proportions in "le prince des nuées", in Shakespeare's prince. This Baudelaire shares not only with his contemporaries, Delacroix and Berlioz, but with Goethe and Coleridge; a remark by the English poet in "Table Talk" is conveniently brief and to the point, although its smugness belittles the weight of passionate concern which produced it: "Hamlet's character is the prevalence of the abstracting and generalising habit over the practical.... I have a smack of Hamlet myself, if I may say so".⁽¹⁾ My point is an obvious one: in so far as Baudelaire's isolation is a problem, his insistent assertions of his right to other-worldly community do nothing in the way of coming to terms with the problem as it exists in this world—they seek not merely to ignore, but to exacerbate it, depending, as I have said, on a concentration rather than an extension of sympathy. In order to find that sort of extension—a sign not simply of an increasingly, less equivocally sincere effort to find his own community but of the fruition of the kind of intelligent awareness which is at least promised in the stanza which was added to "L'Albatros"—we must turn to what I have often thought his most

(1) Coleridge, "Table Talk", 24th June, 1827.

astounding poem, if only because of its sheer breadth of reference, "Le Cygne". It will be observed that this poem offers a far more eloquent judgment than I could hope to provide on "L'Albatros", which in certain obvious respects may be said to be its blueprint.

Although the breadth of the poem, the scale of its conception, may seem to make "L'Albatros" an unworthy or even meaningless point of comparison, it is because of that very scale that the comparison demands to be made, for the marvellous imaginative range for which "Le Cygne" is justly celebrated derives much of its impact from the masculine strength of intellectual command which lies behind it, the sort of strength which we have already struggled (and failed) to find in "L'Albatros"; its remarkable modulations from legendary to quotidian, from past to present, have the smooth and lucid power of logical association to secure (and so, in another sense, release) the imaginative freedom which suggested them. This intellectual strength is, perhaps, most impressively evident in the quality and limpidity of observation of which the poem is consistently capable:—

"Paris change! mais rien dans ma mélancolie
N'a bougé! palais neufs, échafaudages, blocs,
Vieux faubourgs, tout pour moi devient allégorie,
Et mes chers souvenirs sont plus lourds que des rocs."

The stanza shows how, far from offering a degree of consolation by assuring that inner, spiritual sanctity which signifies an essential truth to his proper element, Baudelaire's consciousness of the one remaining vestige of his elemental, inalienable dignity—his memory of the Paris of his youth—has, in his state of irrevocable exile from the city of his memory, simply added to the sense of desolation which in many an earlier poem, "L'Albatros" included, it would certainly have been expected to dispel:—

"Et mes chers souvenirs sont plus lourds que des rocs".

Thus Baudelaire perceives the destructiveness of a reliance for spiritual

nourishment on "la Douleur" (such is the nature of his commentary on a poem like "L'Albatros"); consider, for example, the way he plays off "tettent la Douleur comme une bonne louve" against "rongé d'un désir sans treve", allowing "tettent" and "rongé" a quality of mutual definition which is reminiscent of Racine (like so much else in the poem, of course), and by so doing suggesting that the exile who sucks the teat of "la Douleur" effectively gnaws at his own guts by inflaming the intolerable and insatiable desire to return to his proper element.

But what most distinguishes "Le Cygne" is the quality of the sympathy which accompanies that unflinching manner of inquiry, for it is the measure of understanding that he has gained of his own essential isolation which leads him to appreciate the depth of suffering of which others, however insignificant they may appear to be, are capable. The poem's interpenetrative design is the very blueprint of such sympathy, for it shows the way in which Baudelaire's sense of his own plight and his vision of that of others are mutually re-inforcing, and so embodies the operations of an imagination which is concerned to establish bonds—and not, as before, barriers—of sensibility. Such a quality of conception informs the profoundly and pragmatically generous thought which is set down in the final stanza, "Je pense aux matelots oubliés dans une île", an act of remembrance when what the shipwrecked sailors fear most is that they will be forgotten. But it is a quality which is at its most remarkable in the conception of the role played in the interpenetrative design by the figure of legendary, aristocratic sensibility, Andromache; the more remarkable when we consider what has happened to Baudelaire's attitude towards such a figure on the way from Elsinore to Troy. "Le Cygne", with that swift power of association, encourages and persuades us (where we are merely bludgeoned in "L'Albatros") to find some of the awesome, mythical stature of Andromache's grief not only in the poet's own plight but in the apparently pathetically insignificant, quotidian suffering of the swan and the "négresse, amaigrie et phtisique"; it allows

them a spiritual dignity which is fully answerable to the misery of their actual existence, and as a result has never to shrink from facing up to the full extent of that misery in the way that "L'Albatros" shrinks from it. Baudelaire does not lay claim to Andromache for his own self-aggrandisement, as he does Hamlet, but makes her the centre of a community of feeling whose lineaments and members the poem describes and whose authenticity it embodies. In "Le Cygne", his treatment of the aristocrat of sensibility is characterised by a generous diffusion of spiritual quality, an extension of sympathy, and not, as in the poems in which he reveals his sense of identity with Hamlet, by jealous suffusion and concentration. He has begun to overcome that suffocating, self-thwarting vice which Sainte-Beuve warned him against, and which, as I hope I have shown, prevails in a good deal of his poetry: "Ne craignez pas tant de sentir comme les autres".