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| ***Fleurs du Mal* (1851-66)** |
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| Charles BAUDELAIRE’s *Fleurs du Mal* (1851-66) is perhaps the most important collection of poems in the nineteenth century and, coupled with Gustave Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*, constitutes a key and pivotal work of literary modernity. In it are themes that greatly shaped modernism: the notions of spleen and ‘ennui’, the grotesque, ambivalent subjectivity, the phantasmagoria of commodification, the introduction of the city into lyrical poetry, the ‘Modern’, and ‘Modernity’. |
| Charles BAUDELAIRE’s *Fleurs du Mal* (1851-66) is perhaps the most important collection of poems in the nineteenth century and, coupled with Gustave Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*, constitutes a key and pivotal work of literary modernity. In it are themes that greatly shaped modernism: the notions of spleen and ‘ennui’, the grotesque, ambivalent subjectivity, the phantasmagoria of commodification, the introduction of the city into lyrical poetry, the ‘Modern’, and ‘Modernity’.  A major theme of the *Fleurs du Mal* is the opposition of ‘Spleen et Idéal’ (‘Spleen and Ideal’), in which are developed and renewed Romantic notions of beauty and disenchantment. The two concepts, opposed, represent the interdependent poles of modern subjectivity and poetic creation. On one hand, there is the very romantic ‘Ideal’, the exotic dream of distant shores, of the ‘voyage’ to Cythera of aesthetic beauty. On the other hand there is the ‘Mal du siècle’ (an epochal malaise or world-weariness) and melancholy disenchantment that characterized much of Romantic and early modernist sensibility. These two poles depend upon each other in Baudelaire’s works (the same opposition functions in his prose poems, the *Petits Poèmes en Prose*) in their reciprocal tension: the Romantic dream is an escape from a disenchanted world, the disenchantment is the inevitable crash that comes from the illusion of the dream.  Baudelaire developed a formal-thematic poetic expression of this condition, thus continuing the Romantic tradition and at the same time implicitly critiquing or diagnosing it, similarly to Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary*. (Indeed, one of the clearest expressions of Baudelaire’s literary theory appears in his short piece on *Madame Bovary*.) An example of the formal-thematic expression of the opposition between beauty and disenchantment would be the grotesque, a notion initially developed in the nineteenth century by Victor Hugo. The grotesque is at once aesthetic, in that the beautiful and the ugly are combined using conflicting literary techniques such as clashing vocabulary, imagery and dissonant and discordant verse; and thematic, in that ideas not normally together are combined to create new associations and perspectives. The whole creates a new sensation of simultaneous beauty and disgust, wonder and horror.  Beauty, as connected to the grotesque, adds another aspect to the anguished opposition between ‘Spleen et Idéal’. In his ‘Hymne à la Beauté’ (“Hymn to Beauty”), Baudelaire describes beauty thus: ‘Viens-tu du ciel profond ou sors-tu de l’abîme, / O Beauté ? Ton regard, infernal et divin, / Verse confusément le bienfait et le crime, / Et l’on peut pour cela te comparer au vin’ (‘Did you spring out of heaven or the abyss, / Beauty? Your gaze infernal, yet divine, / Spreads infamy and glory, grief and bliss, / And therefore you can be compared to wine’ Campbell translation, 1952). Thus theological implications play a key role in Baudelaire’s poetics, and come to define the parameters of ‘ennui’ (both boredom and melancholy), as Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben demonstrates. ‘L'ennui’ is in fact a key theme of the collection, right from the dedication to the reader, ‘Au lecteur’, which is also an address to the ‘Bourgeois’, the ‘hypocrite lecteur’ (“hypocritical reader”) who would condemn the work out of false morality.  Baudelaire states that ‘dans ce livre atroce, j'ai mis tout mon cœur, toute ma tendresse, toute ma religion (travestie), toute ma haine’ (‘in this horrible book I have put all my heart, all my tenderness, all my religion (falsified), all my hatred’). It is, however, a structured collection, and Baudelaire attempted to give it meaning and order: ‘le seul éloge que je sollicite pour ce livre est qu'on reconnaisse qu'il n'est pas un pur album et qu'il a un commencement et une fin’ (‘the only praise that I seek for this book is that one recognize that it is not a pure album and that it has a beginning and an end’, letter to Vigny, 1861). In this, Baudelaire distinguishes the *Fleurs* from Romantic albums and sentimental chronologies, such as Victor Hugo’s *Contemplations*. He thus proposes a structured whole and a journey through its reading, refusing to publish the poems separately. However, whether each of the poems is in relation with the others, and exactly how, is up for debate (Walter Benjamin argues in favour of a ‘personal suffering’ that guides the collection’s structure, to the exclusion of all other lyrical themes). It is nevertheless clear that it is a cycle of poems in dialogue, in the same way that the Ideal cannot be thought of separately from Spleen, and each poem elucidates the others. It is a totality of moveable parts, as Leo Bersani states, where the meaning is always dynamic. The poem also is likened to a ‘flânerie’ as the experience of modernity, the flâneur also being one of those key figures of modernism introduced by Baudelaire. There is also the possibility that the poem is ‘epic’, insofar as Baudelaire asks, in the *Salon* of 1846, what the epic side of modern life might be. Yet it would only ever be fragmentary, contingent, fleeting — key characteristics of Baudelaire’s modernity.  There is also a certain progressive structure in the *Fleurs*. ‘Au lecteur’ opens the collection with a warning to the reader against ennui; ‘Spleen et Idéal’ is a description of the schism of modern identity; ‘Tableaux parisiens’, the ugliness and majesty of the modern city; ‘Le vin’ and ‘Fleurs du mal’ a panorama of the temptations of the flesh, dreams, and ‘artificial paradises’, femme fatales; ‘Révolte’, insults, blasphemy, prayers and litanies; and finally ‘La Mort’ (‘Death’), the final temptation of death as salvation and a fragile, problematic alienation in the ‘unknown’ and the ‘new’, without any possible resolution.  The collection is also noted for its misogynistic representations, whether Baudelaire is projecting his own psychoses onto women who mirror male desire (according to Susan Wolf), or whether these women (who include not just lovers, but widows and beggars, representing poverty and the difficulties of childbirth) are distinctly individual, never fading into stereotypes, expressing the transience of human relationships (according to Rosemary Lloyd).  Because of legal problems and censorship following the initial publication of the collection, there are multiple editions of the *Fleurs du Mal*. The first edition appeared in 1857, and a second in 1861, minus six censored poems and including 35 new poems and the ‘Tableaux parisiens’. The 1866 edition included new poems, *Epaves* (‘Scraps’), as well as the censored poems. This edition appeared in Brussels, as the censored poems were banned in France. A posthumous edition appeared in 1868 that excluded the censored poems, and a *Complément aux Fleurs du Mal de Charles Baudelaire* was published with the *Épaves* in 1869. The censored poems were only published in France in 1949 after a review of the legal condemnations of offenses against good morals ‘committed by the means of books’. |
| Further reading:  (Agamben)  (Benjamin)  (Bersani)  (Burton)  (Lloyd)  (Wolf) |