



Whitman and Baudelaire

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WHITMAN AND BAUDELAIRE

Baudelaire's name occurs once, and only once, in Whitman's writings, in the essay on "The Poetry of the Future," first printed in the *North American Review* for February, 1881, and reprinted in Floyd Stovall's edition of the *Prose Works 1892* (New York University Press, 1964), 2:474-490. In the essay, Whitman does not discuss Baudelaire or his work, but merely quotes from him, as follows:

"The immoderate taste for beauty and art," says Charles Baudelaire, "leads men into monstrous excesses. In minds embued with a frantic greed for the beautiful, all the balances of truth and justice disappear. There is a lust, a disease of the art faculties, which eats up the moral like a cancer." (p. 482)

As Betsy Erkkila points out in her recent book, *Walt Whitman Among the French* (Princeton University Press, 1980, p. 54), "The citation comes from Baudelaire's critique of the formal and plastic art" of the Parnassian Poets. This critique first appeared in an early article by Baudelaire, "L'Ecole païenne," published in 1852 and collected in *L'Art romantique* (Paris: Michel Lévy frères, 1869). Erkkila adds that "Whitman had copied Baudelaire's words from an article by Sainte-Beuve, which had appeared in one of the journals of the time." It is true that Whitman quoted a passage from Sainte-Beuve in "The Poetry of the Future," (lines 249-259 in Stovall's text), but Whitman did not find the passage in an article by Sainte-Beuve; as the note on lines 249-259 clearly states, "Whitman must have copied the passage from an unsigned review of [the *Causeries du Lundi*] in the section of 'Critical Notices' of NAR Vol. 108 (January, 1869), pp. 296-299." The cause of Erkkila's mistake is quite obvious. She consulted Stovall's note on the quotation from Sainte-Beuve, when she should have consulted the note on the passage from Baudelaire (lines 263-267 in the Stovall text), which reads: "The source of this quotation in the translated works of Baudelaire available to Whitman has not been located. The quotation is not in the Feinberg MS."

It is fairly certain that Whitman did not borrow the statement by Baudelaire from *L'Art romantique*, for it is generally agreed that he did not read French books in the original, but relied invariably on translations. Now, *L'Art romantique* (and the article on "L'Ecole païenne") did not exist in English translation during Whitman's lifetime; indeed, "L'Ecole païenne" is one of the few writings of Baudelaire that remain untranslated to this very day.

Where then could Whitman have come across the passage from Baudelaire? Since he had found the one from Sainte-Beuve in the *North American Review*, a good starting place seemed to be a substantial article on Baudelaire in some American or British magazine. Since comparatively few such articles were published before 1881, the search would not appear to be extremely arduous.

Only four important articles on Baudelaire appeared in American reviews prior to the publication of Whitman's essay. The first of these was "Charles Baudelaire, Poet of the Malign" by Eugene Benson, in the *Atlantic Monthly* for February, 1869. Whitman may very well have seen this article, since one of his own poems, "Proud Music of the Sea-Storm," was printed anonymously in the very same issue. He would probably have noticed this interesting comparison:

The reader of Baudelaire's poems is first struck with the force of the sentiment, the vigor of the thought, the strength of the feeling, that animates them. They are the poems of a virile being. They have not one effeminate note. In this particular they have the same masculine and refreshingly frank character that we find in the less musical utterances of Walt Whitman. The resemblance is entirely due to the uniformity of the genuine, virile, poetic mind. Whenever he speaks, you hear the voice of a *man* in his agony, in his gladness, in his transports. The character of largeness, which is opposed to perfumed drawing-room daintiness, is likewise found in Baudelaire as it is found in Whitman. What he writes is wholly free from triviality.

Though Whitman probably read Benson's article, he did not find in it the quotation he later used, for Benson says nothing whatever about "L'Ecole païenne."

The second important American article was "Charles Pierre Baudelaire," by Kate Hillard (under her pen-name of "Lucy Fountain"), in *Lippincott's Magazine* for October, 1871. Like Benson, Hillard also referred to Whitman:

That realism which had its dawn with Wordsworth and his disciples and was the main-spring of the Pre-Raphaelite school in Art, is the distinguishing characteristic of the highest literature of the day, and finds its broadest expression with us in the writings of Walt Whitman.

Whitman may have seen Hillard's compliment, but he did not find in her article the passage from "L'Ecole païenne."¹

The third substantial article on Baudelaire was "A Group of Poets. Charles Baudelaire," by James A. Harrison, in the *Southern Magazine* for January 1873, and included later in *A Group of Poets and Their Haunts* (N.Y.: Hurd and Houghton, 1875, pp. 302-319). Harrison was chiefly interested in Baudelaire as the translator of Poe, although he discusses his poetry also; he completely ignores Baudelaire's critical writings.

The last article on Baudelaire in America before 1881 was the deplorable diatribe by Henry James, written at the mischievous instigation of his brother, William, and published in *The Nation* for 27 April 1876, later reprinted in *French Poets and Novelists* (Macmillan, 1878). James disliked Baudelaire as violently as he did Whitman, considering both of them as "nasty." He makes no reference, of course, to "L'Ecole païenne."

The British magazines published a number of articles on Baudelaire prior to 1881, but only two of them stand out. The first was an unsigned article by Swinburne in *The Spectator* for 6 September 1862. This is primarily a review of the second edition of *Les Fleurs du mal* and does not deal with Baudelaire's criticism or with "L'Ecole païenne," which he undoubtedly had never read.

Finally, we come to the enormously influential study of Baudelaire by George Saintsbury, in the *Fortnightly Review* for October, 1875. We know that Whitman was aware that Saintsbury was one of his British admirers and a subscriber to one of the editions of the *Leaves of Grass*. In this article, Whitman would find another favorable comment on his own work; indeed, the article might have been called to his attention for that reason. According to Saintsbury, the true critic "judges more by the form than by the matter of the work submitted to his notice." And he continues:

Matter-criticism is particularly untrustworthy where trustworthiness is most to be desired, in the case of new or exceptional work or workers. Half the critical remarks which have been made for instance on Walt Whitman are vitiated by this defect. The critic has made up his mind that ultra-democratic views are admirable or damnable as the case may be, and all his criticism is tinged by this prepossession.

Baudelaire, affirmed Saintsbury, was "remarkable among French authors . . . for the perfect sanity with which he looks at both sides of his own peculiarities. . . ." As an example of this faculty in Baudelaire, Saintsbury refers to "a very remarkable essay, 'L'École païenne,' published in 1852." From this essay, Saintsbury quotes:

Le goût immodéré de la forme pousse à des désordres monstrueux et inconnus. Absorbées par la passion féroce du beau, du drôle, du joli, du pittoresque, car il y a des degrés, les notions du juste et du vrai disparaissent. La passion frénétique de l'art est un chancre qui dévore le reste: et comme l'absence nette du juste et du vrai dans l'art équivaut à l'absence d'art, l'homme entier s'évanouit, la spécialisation excessive d'une faculté aboutit au néant.

Comparing this text with the one in Whitman's essay, it is clear that the latter cannot be regarded as a translation; it is, at best, a rough adaptation, beginning with a quite literal version of the French, but rapidly turning into a loose interpretation, which is not always easy to match with the original. The English version is so rough, in fact, that one suspects that it was made by Whitman himself. No qualified translator would have produced such a confusing, and even such an inaccurate, imitation.

There is therefore little doubt that Whitman knew *something* about Baudelaire, from his attentive reading of the excellent study by Saintsbury. But what did Baudelaire know about Whitman? Whitman's name is never mentioned anywhere in Baudelaire's published works or correspondence. That does not prove, of course, that he was completely ignorant of Poe's fellow countryman. Indeed, there is fairly solid evidence that he knew Whitman's name and, at least by second-hand, something about his work. The first article on Whitman to appear in France, as Erkkila points out (p. 239), was the one by Louis Etienne on "Walt Whitman, poète, philosophe et 'rowdy,'" which appeared in the *Revue européenne* for November, 1861. Baudelaire was a regular contributor to the *Revue européenne*. Furthermore, in the very same issue that contained Etienne's article on Whitman, Baudelaire published one of his best-known poems, "Recueillement." It is possible, therefore, and even probable, that Baudelaire read with interest what Etienne had to say about the American poet. Assuming that he did, Baudelaire would not have been encouraged to learn more about Whitman, for Etienne's view of *Leaves of Grass* and its author was extremely hostile. Even if he had possessed more information on Whitman, it is doubtful that Baudelaire would have cared for the man or his poetry. Erkkila, in view of the fact that both Whitman and Baudelaire were precursors of the Symbolist movement in France, attempts to show that the two men were similar in some respects. Her struggle to do so reminds one of the old riddle: "Why are Calvin Coolidge and U. S. Grant alike?" Answer: "Because they both had thick black beards . . . except Calvin Coolidge!"

NOTES

1 The articles by Benson, Hillard and Saintsbury are not listed in Scott Giantvalley's *Walt Whitman, 1838-1939* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1981).

REVIEWS

C. Carroll Hollis. *Language and Style in Leaves of Grass*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1983. xii, 277 pp. \$27.50.

Whitman's debt in *Leaves of Grass* to the oratorical tradition in mid-nineteenth-century America has been commented on by a number of critics as a matter of course, but C. Carroll Hollis has for the first time provided a full-scale, often provocative study of this important influence on Whitman.

Around 1848 or so, Whitman was well aware that an effective speaker could make a career in oratory. He particularly admired the Quaker preacher Elias Hicks and Father Taylor (Melville's Father Mapple), the one for "his passionate unstudied oratory" and the other as the "one essentially perfect orator." In his 1839 *Journal*, Emerson defined the great appeal of the public platform: ". . . here everything is admissible, philosophy, ethics, divinity, criticism, poetry, humor, fun, mimicry, anecdotes, jokes. . . . Here [the orator] may lay himself out utterly, large, enormous, prodigal, on the subject of the hour. Here he may dare to hope for ecstasy and eloquence." And Whitman echoed Emerson's ideas in his comments on Hicks and Taylor, who had "the same inner . . . fund of latent volcanic passion—the same tenderness, blended with a curious remorseless firmness. . . . Hearing such men sends to the winds all the books, and formulas, and polished speaking, and rules of oratory."

Apparently Whitman was aware that he lacked such oratorical skills, and fortunately looked elsewhere to make his mark. He has left a large number of notes on the subject scattered in various collections. Hollis has examined this published and unpublished material and did not find a single complete draft for a lecture. If for Whitman performing in public might well have been a fantasy, the techniques of the orator were not. It was Whitman's shift from the orator *manqué* to the reality of *Leaves of Grass* that Mr. Hollis is concerned with in this work.

Put briefly, it is Mr. Hollis's thesis that much of Whitman's poetry from 1855 to 1860, or from the first to the third edition of *Leaves*, is heavily indebted to the oral tradition. Here Whitman addressed his readers, the "You" of his poems, in direct, closely personal terms that were the stock-in-trade of the orator. However, in his poetry after the Civil War, he mainly drops the one-to-one oratorical techniques of the earlier poetry and becomes less personal; the physicality of his early work gives way to the spiritual and in the process often he becomes abstract. Moreover, as his attitudes change, and in line with his current thinking, he returns to *Leaves of Grass* to alter his original work, often through heavy revisions.

To be sure much of this has received comment elsewhere, but Mr. Hollis's approach here is solidly informed by his knowledge of nineteenth-century oratorical techniques, and to that extent he adds much to our awareness of the direction of *Leaves of Grass*