

BULLETIN BAUDELAIRIEN



le 31 août 1965

Vol. 1 No 1

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Publié deux fois par an, le 9 avril et le 31 août à Nashville,
Tennessee, U.S.A.

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AVIS AUX LECTEURS

Nous nous faisons aujourd'hui le plaisir d'offrir aux Baudelairiens le premier numéro d'une publication dédiée à leur service et à l'honneur du poète.

Notre intention est de paraître deux fois par an, le 9 avril et le 31 août. Nous sollicitons et publierons des articles dont l'utilité fait la valeur. Comme modèle nous n'avons qu'à évoquer le nom de Jacques Crépet . . .

Nous voudrions établir dans ces pages une sorte de forum où se rencontreront les Baudelairiens sur des questions d'intérêt précis et général: celles surtout de caractère bibliographique, biographique ou textuel.

Nous invitons tout intéressé à envoyer des questions à poser; nous les soumettrons à nos lecteurs sous la rubrique: *Enigmes*, espérant de cette manière faciliter le libre échange de renseignements. Les annonces paraissant sous titre de *Travaux en cours* seront, croyons-nous, également utiles aux chercheurs. Bien entendu, nous serons heureux de recevoir de nos lecteurs des détails de ce genre, ou sur leurs propres projets ou sur ceux qu'ils connaissent.

Enfin, nous voudrions offrir à Vanderbilt University nos sincères remerciements de l'aide qu'elle nous apporte; son enthousiasme, sa compréhension et sa bienveillance sont bien appréciés de nous.

THE JAMES BROTHERS AND BAUDELAIRE

The first English and American critics of Baudelaire were, on the whole, rather well-disposed. As early as 1862, Swinburne greeted the second edition of *Les Fleurs du Mal* with a long and enthusiastic article in *The Spectator*.¹ Inspired by this example, two American writers, Eugene Benson and Kate Hillard (under her pen-name of Lucy Fountain) published two equally sympathetic studies of the French poet in 1869 and 1871, respectively.² There were dissenting voices, of course. Robert Buchanan, in his diatribe against Swinburne and Rossetti, took occasion to excoriate Baudelaire as a "dandy of the brothel" and as "the godfather as it were of the modern Fleshly School."³ Buchanan's pamphlet created a stir at the time, but its effect on the English reading public was largely off-set by an excellent article by George Saintsbury, in which he called Baudelaire "the most original, and within his limits the most remarkable of modern French poets."⁴

Against this background, Henry James's essay on Baudelaire, published originally in *The Nation* in 1876 and reprinted two years later in *French Poets and Novelists*, takes on special significance.⁵ James took his stand squarely alongside Buchanan, with whose work he was probably familiar. He accused Baudelaire of superficiality and insincerity, describing his view of evil as "almost ludicrously puerile." For Baudelaire, according to James, evil "begins outside and not inside, and consists primarily of a great deal of lurid landscape and unclean furniture." Although James conceded that "Baudelaire had a certain groping sense of the moral complexities of life," he suffered from "a dulness and permanent immaturity of vision." In short, James concludes, "He tried to make fine verses on ignoble subjects, and in our opinion he signally failed."

One might well ask why, in a book on French poets, James saw fit to ignore completely such major figures as Lamartine, Vigny and Hugo, and to include an ill-tempered essay on a poet for whom he felt little admiration or sympathy. The question has not had the attention it deserves, even on the part of our most competent Jamesians. In their *Bibliography of Henry James*, published in 1957 and revised in 1961, Leon

Edel and Dan H. Laurence stated that the chapter on Baudelaire in *French Poets and Novelists* first appeared "as a review of *Les Fleurs du Mal*."⁶ This is an incredibly bad guess, since the only edition of *Les Fleurs du Mal* in print at the time James wrote his article was one published by Michel Lévy in 1868; it is most unlikely that James would review a book that had been on the market for eight years. It is the purpose of this paper to reveal the true source of Henry James's interest in Baudelaire and to trace the history of the composition of his article in *The Nation*—a history which is not without a certain piquancy.

In the issue for 2 December 1875, *The Nation* published the following letter, under the heading "The Neo-Pagans:"

TO THE EDITOR OF THE NATION:

SIR: What is a poor reader to do when the most authoritative dictators of literary opinion flatly contradict each other? I am composing, for the use of high schools and academies, a manual of the literature of the nineteenth century. After reading the able article on Charles Baudelaire, by G. Saintsbury, in the November *Fortnightly*, I penned a short notice of him for my work, based on what Mr. Saintsbury had said, for I have no first-hand acquaintance with his writings. No sooner had I done so than a friend pointed out to me an article in the last volumes of 'Etudes' by Edmond Schérer [sic], which made me tremble at my rash confidingness. Which is right and which is wrong? Here is the key-note of Saintsbury:

"Valuable and delightful as he is for private study; with no further end, he should be yet more valuable and productive of multiplied delight as a model and a stimulant. It is reported of a scholar not unknown at one of our universities that before going to bed he invariably, in conscious or unconscious parody of ancient habits, reads a sonnet of Shakspeare. If this practice should spread, and manuals of devotion become common among men of letters, I know none that I should be tempted to adopt myself and to recommend to others in preference to the writings of Charles Baudelaire."

And here is a specimen of Schérer :

“There is no reason why this process [of seeking strong *sensation* in literature] should ever stop. The terrible being exhausted, we come to the horrible and the disgusting. We paint unclean things. We grow furious and wallow in them. But this rottenness itself rots; this decomposition engenders a decomposition more fetid still, until there remains an indescribable something that has no name in any language. *Voilà Baudelaire.*”

Yours truly,

W.J.

WORCESTER, Mass., Oct. 29, 1875.⁷

This letter was followed by a long editorial note, which began: “We fear that this letter, under the specious garb of ingenuousness, may really be an insidious attack upon the authority of literary critics in general.” The note continued with an unfavorable comment on Saintsbury: “there mantles already upon his genius the hue of a premature decrepitude.” It further declared that “The entire neo-pagan school of writers in England, from Mr. Swinburne all the way down to the present critic [Saintsbury], must fill conservative Britons with amazement at its performances.” The anonymous author of this note was obviously well acquainted with Buchanan’s pamphlet; he showed his complete agreement with its position and even borrowed some of Buchanan’s peculiar phraseology. The note ends with a bit of advice: if *The Nation’s* correspondent is “still bent upon composing his ‘History’ at second-hand,” he will find Scherer (“one of the foremost living critics”) “a far safer guide to follow than any of his English ‘pagan’ rivals.”

Saintsbury did not allow these asperations against his personal and literary character to pass without a protest; his reply to *The Nation* was printed in the issue for 13 January 1876.⁸ In it, he re-affirmed his admiration for Baudelaire’s poetry but denied that he belonged to any sect or school of Neo-Pagans, as alleged by the editor of *The Nation*. Indeed, he declared, his “opinions (were they of any importance) on politics, religion, and all kindred subjects happen to be of a strongly conservative character.” Saintsbury concluded his

letter with this sentence: "If I am asked why I select such a notorious writer as Baudelaire for special consideration, I can reply that I did so with an honest conviction that he had been hardly used, and an honest belief that his literary peculiarities (for which alone I value him) are to be specially studied in these days of hurried work and over-estimate for facts."

James's article appeared in *The Nation* only a little more than three months after the publication of Saintsbury's letter and opened with this sentence: "As a brief discussion was lately carried on touching the merits of the writer whose name we have prefixed to these lines, it may not be amiss to introduce him to some of those readers who must have followed the contest with little more than a vague sense of the strangeness of the subject." It should be clear from this introduction that James was not reviewing a book, but that he was simply providing an explanatory sequel to the preceding discussion. While this confrontation of texts clears up the bibliographical error of Edel and Laurence, it leaves another question unanswered: why did Henry James feel it necessary to become involved in *The Nation's* quarrel over Baudelaire?

For many years, I strongly suspected that the "W.J." whose letter precipitated the controversy was none other than William James, Henry's brother and mentor. Unfortunately, I was unable to discover proof of this intuitive assumption until recently, when I consulted Ralph Barton Perry's study on *The Thought and Character of William James*.⁹ On page 143 of that work is given the text of a letter from William James to Henry, then living in Paris. The letter, which is dated 12 December 1875, contains this interesting passage:

The only other thing I have done except mind my anatomy is the squib in the *Nation* which I enclose. In the interval between sending it and seeing it in print, I have dipped into Baudelaire and am reluctantly obliged to confess that Scherer is quite as wrong as Saintsbury. It is a pity that every writer in France is bound to do injustice to the opposite "camp." Baudelaire is really, in his *Fleurs du Mal*, original and in a certain sense elevated, and on

the whole I can bear no rancor against him, although at times he writes like a person half-awake and groping for words. The most amusing thing about it all is the impression one gets of the innocence of a generation in which the *Fleurs du Mal* should have made a *scandal*. It is a mild and spiritualistic book today. Get it and write about it in the *Nation* or *Atlantic*, if you like, and especially read a letter of Sainte-Beuve's at the end of it, which is the *ne plus ultra* of his diabolic subtlety and malice.

The editor of *The Nation* was certainly justified, as it turns out, in distrusting the "specious ingenuousness" of W.J. It is indeed more than likely that he was well aware of the identity of his correspondent. The speed with which William forwarded a copy of his "squib" to Paris leads one to suspect that he may have been trying to play the same kind of mischievous prank on his brother that he had played on the editor of *The Nation*. It would be most interesting to know what he thought of Henry's essay on Baudelaire. He would surely not have agreed that Baudelaire had "signally failed" as a poet. In spite of his reservations concerning both critics, his views on Baudelaire, as expressed in his letter, were much nearer those of Saintsbury than they were those of Scherer. From his comments, brief as they are, one gathers that he was able to see in *Les Fleurs du Mal* much that escaped his brother's attention: the originality, elevation and spiritual quality of *Les Fleurs du Mal*. He had read the book for himself, without caring very much what the critics had said about it; Henry was apparently more interested in refuting Saintsbury's ideas on art and morality than in understanding Baudelaire. The contrast between the two points of view could hardly be more striking: William grasped immediately and unerringly the true sense of Baudelaire's poetry, while Henry failed to see anything in it beyond a certain technical virtuosity reminiscent of Théophile Gautier, but altogether inferior. If we may take Baudelaire as the touchstone, then it would appear that the psychologist was a more profound and sensitive judge of literary values than the professional novelist and critic.

- 1) XXXV (6 September 1862), 998-1000.
- 2) Eugene Benson, "Charles Baudelaire, Poet of the Malign," *Atlantic Monthly*, XXIII (February 1869), 171-177; Lucy Fountain, "Charles Pierre Baudelaire," *Lippincott's Magazine*, VIII (October 1871), 383-388.
- 3) Robert Buchanan, *The Fleshly School of Poetry*, London, Strahan & Co., 1872, pp. 16-33.
- 4) George Saintsbury, "Charles Baudelaire," *Fortnightly Review*, XXIV (October 1875), 500-518.
- 5) Henry James, "Charles Baudelaire," *The Nation*, XXII (27 April 1876), 279-281; *French Poets and novelists*, London Macmillan, 1878. Reprinted: Leipzig, Tauchnitz, 1883. New edition: London, Macmillan, 1884. Reprinted: London, Macmillan, 1893, 1904, 1908, 1919. Recently re-issued in a paperback edition. This book is a favorite with contributors to encyclopedias, who list it frequently in articles on Baudelaire, apparently without first-hand knowledge of its contents. One foreign encyclopedia (*Encyclopedia Universal Ilustrada*, Barcelona, Espasa, 1914) cites it as follows: Jacopo French, *Poets and Novelists* (London, 1884).
- 6) Leon Edel and Dan H. Laurence, *A Bibliography of Henry James*, London, Rupert Hart-Davis, 1961, pp. 35 and 316.
- 7) *The Nation*, XXI (2 December 1875), 355.
- 8) *The Nation*, XXII (13 January 1876), 27. Some of the facts given thus far were discussed by James W. Gargano, in his article "Henry James on Baudelaire," in *Modern Language Notes*, LXXV (November 1960) 559-561. Mr. Gargano, not aware that "W.J." was William James, takes him to be a naive high school teacher.
- 9) Ralph Barton Perry, *The Thought and Character of William James*. Briefer Version. Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1948. My attention was directed to this work by a reference in the unpublished doctoral dissertation by Joseph Canter on *The Literary Reputation of Baudelaire in England and America, 1857-1934* (Harvard, 1940). It is a pity that this excellent study has not been made available in a more widely accessible form.

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TRAVAUX EN COURS

Une concordance des *Fleurs du Mal*, préparée par M. Robert T. Cargo, est annoncée par l'University of North Carolina Press. Cet ouvrage, qui paraîtra presque en même temps que ce *Bulletin*, est destiné à rendre de grands services à tous les Baudelairiens. Nous en rendrons compte dans notre numéro d'avril. M. Cargo est également en train de préparer deux autres concordances : des *Petits Poèmes en Prose* et des *Journaux intimes*. On nous écrit de Paris que l'Université de Besançon publie elle aussi, une concordance des *Fleurs du Mal*, préparée sous la direction du professeur Quemada.