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# CHARLES BAUDELAIRE

Poet, Critic and Man of Letters  
By Arthur Symons

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**F**EW modern poets have been more frequently drawn, and few have better repaid drawing, than Charles Baudelaire. Manet painted and engraved a portrait of Baudelaire in 1862; he painted and engraved another in 1865.

It is often said, not without a certain kind of truth, that the likeness is precisely what matters least in a portrait. That is one of the interesting heresies which Whistler did not learn from Velasquez. Because a portrait which is a likeness, and nothing more than a likeness, can often be done by a second-rate artist, by a kind of sympathetic trick, it need not follow that likeness is in itself an unimportant quality in a masterly portrait, nor will it be found that likeness was ever disregarded by the greatest painters. But there are many kinds of likenesses, among which we have to choose, as we have to choose in all art which follows nature, between a realism of outward circumstance and a realism of inner significance. Every individual face has as many different expressions as the soul behind it has moods. When we talk, currently, of a "good likeness," we mean, for the most part, that a single, habitual expression, with which we are familiar, as we are familiar with a frequently worn suit of clothes, has been rendered; that we see a man as we imagine ourselves ordinarily to see him. But, in the first place, most people see nothing with any sort of precision; they cannot tell you the position and shape of the ears, or the shape of the cheek-bones, of their most intimate friends. Their mental vision is so feeble that they can call up only a blurred image, a vague compromise between expressions, without any definite form at all. Others have a mental vision so sharp, retentive, yet without selection, that to think of a person is to call up a whole series of precise images, each the image of a particular expression at a particular moment; the whole series failing to coalesce into one really typical likeness, the likeness of soul or body. Now it is the artist's business to choose among these mental pictures; better still, to create on paper, or on his canvas, the image which was none of these, but which these helped to make in his own soul.

**T**HE Manet portrait of Charles Baudelaire, dated 1862, is exquisite, ironical, subtle, enigmatical, astonishing. He has arrested the head and shoulders of the poet in an instant's vision; the outlines are definite, clear, severe and simple. One sees the eager head thrust forward, as if the man were actually walking; the fine and delicate nose, voluptuously dilated in the nostrils, seems to breathe in vague perfumes; the mouth, half-seen, has a touch of his malicious irony; the right eye shines vividly in a fixed glance, those eyes that had the colour of Spanish tobacco. Over the long waving hair, that seems to be swept backward by the wind, is placed, with unerring skill, at the exact angle, that top-hat that Baudelaire had to have expressly made to fit the size of his head. Around his long neck is just seen the white soft collar of his shirt, with a twisted tie in front. In this picture one sees the inspired poet, with distinct touches of this strong piece of thinking flesh and blood. And Manet indicates, I think, that glimpse of the soul which one needs in a perfect likeness.

In the one done in 1865, the pride of youth, the dandy, the vivid profile, have disappeared. Here, as if in an eternal aspect, Baudelaire is shown. There is his tragic mask; the glory of

the eyes, that seem to defy life, to defy death, seems enormous, almost monstrous. The lips are closed tightly together, in their long sinuous line, almost as if Leonardo da Vinci had stamped them with his immortality. The genius of Manet has shown the genius of Baudelaire in a gigantic shadow; the whole face surging out of that dark shadow; and the soul is there!

**I**N the portrait by Carjat, his face and his eyes are contorted as if in a terrible rage; the whole face seems drawn upward and downward in a kind of convulsion; and the aspect, one confesses, shows a degraded type, as if all the vices he had never committed looked out of his eyes in a wild revolt.

It is in the mask of Baudelaire done by Zachari Astruc that I find almost the ethereal beauty, the sensitive nerves, the drawn lines, of the death-mask of Keats; only, more tragic. It looks out on one as a carved image, perfect in outline, implacable, restless, sensual; and, in that agonized face, what imagination, what enormous vitality, what strange subtlety, what devouring energy! It might be the face of a Roman Emperor, refined, century by century, from the ghastly face of Nero, the dissolute face of Caligula, to this most modern of poets.

It is certainly a curious fact, that Baudelaire, in the whole of his life, wrote only one book of verse: "Les Fleurs du Mal" (1857), reprinted with additions, in 1865; and finally, with a few more additions, in 1869. Yet, this may be, I think, explained when one realizes that, great as he was as a poet, he was, in a sense, as great in his prose. His equity of conscience in matters of art was flawless. As a critic, he has his place beside Lamb and Coleridge. Lamb lived (or imagined he lived) in antiquity; Coleridge was, at times, as Shelley sings of him, "a hooded eagle among blinking owls," at times "obscure in the exceeding lustre of his mind," yet he was the one philosophical critic who was also a poet. Now Baudelaire lived in his own age, and was of his own age; yet, like these his contemporaries, he also discovered (not the great living dead) but Delacroix, Wagner, Méryon, Pétrus Borel; Manet also; and Whistler for France.

So it is he who has said the fundamental thing on the problem of artist and critic. "It would be a wholly new event in the history of the arts if a critic were to turn himself into a poet, a reversal of every psychic law, a monstrosity; on the other hand, all great poets become naturally, inevitably, critics. I pity the critics who are guided solely by instinct; they seem to me incomplete. In the spiritual life of the former there must be a crisis when they would think out their art, discover the obscure laws in consequence of which they have produced, and draw from this study a series of precepts whose divine purpose is infallibility in poetic construction. It would be prodigious for a critic to become a poet, and it is impossible for a poet not to contain a critic."

**I**AM uncertain when Baudelaire first began writing his "Petits Poèmes en Pros." He chose several titles, such as "Le Spleen de Paris." In pages of the famous "Gaspard de la Nuit" of the dedication to Arsène Houssaye he confesses that the idea came to him in turning over the Aloysius Bertrand, which tempted him to choose, not antiquity, but modern life. "Who of us," he says, "has not dreamed, in

moments of ambition, of the miracle of a poetic prose, musical without rhythm and without rhymes, subtle and staccato enough to follow the lyric motions of the soul, the wavering outlines of meditation, the sudden starts of the conscience?" And he achieved—as in his own words, *bagatelles laborieuses*, these astonishing trifles, with a perfect art, a revelation of what such an unusual form could express in words chosen as carefully as in his verse; and, what such prose as this is capable of, with an undeniable sense of rhythm.

And, as he confesses more of himself in these than in his verse, he speaks of his need of bizarre excitement which requires for its fruition that magic world of shadows and of realities which is Paris: its crowds, its music, even its street-lamps. And all Paris is there, and himself, and his visions, laughter, cynicism, invention of incredible and fabulous sensations (as in, not Rimbaud's, but his own, *Saison en enfer*), adventures of the soul and of the senses. His vision rises to the clouds; his creed, final to him and to others, of being always drunken, in which he leaves every one the choice, has that ecstasy which is a kind of revel of an eternal intoxication. And his cry, which was Edgar Poe's, is heightened into something of an agony: the desire of escape.

**I**N "Mademoiselle Bistouri" there is more than an analysis, written by one who loved, passionately, mystery; and in the strange dialogue, in which the woman of the streets shows her particular passion, and refuses to say when it began, he brings in at the end his supplication, that comes astonishingly into a story so banal and yet unsolved. Nor can I resist from quoting it, as it seems to me (written certainly late in his life) almost as if he had seen beyond the world, and confessed himself to the Almighty. "Lord, my God! You, the Creator; you, the Master; you who have made Law and Liberty; you, the one Sovereign who lets alone; you, the Judge who pardons; you who are full of motives and of causes, and who have perhaps put in my mind the taste of horror so as to convert my heart, as the healing at the end of a blade; Lord, have pity, have pity on the madmen and the madwomen! O, Creator! can there exist monsters in the eyes of Him who alone knows why they exist, how they *have made themselves* and how they could not have done otherwise?"

**H**IS nostalgia of the East comes into the prose, his morbid curiosity, his profound pity of the old mountebank; his rather terrible attack on women in general, that is to say mistresses, which has in it something Rabelaisian; his "Portraits de Maitresses," which has in it the tremendous and humorous style and subject of Petronius; the diabolical temptations of two superb Satans and one she-devil, which is simply filled with colours, perfumes, as in the Satan of ambiguous sex, the ancient Bacchus with his serpent-girdle, his violin which spreads the contagion of his folly in the nights of Sabbats; the overwhelming chimera who gives him no respite in his irresistible indifference; all these, and all the rest, lead up to "Une Morte Héroïque," which, in its perfect achievement, in its breathless sense of suspense, its sense of the two dramas of life or of death, tragedy and comedy, and that thrill at the end, which seems to shiver over the terrors of the gulf, has in it, I think, no resemblance in the world of literature.