



Selected Poems
from
Les Fleurs du Mal

CHARLES BAUDELAIRE



To the Reader

Folly, error, sin and parsimony
Preoccupy our spirits and work on our bodies
Feeding our consciences
Like beggars nourishing their lice.

Our sins are stubborn, our repentance weak
We make ourselves pay handsomely for each confession
And happily rejoin the muddy path
Believing our base tears can wash away the stains.

On the pillow of evil, Satan Trismegistus
Cradles at length our enchanted soul
And the rich metal of our will
Is boiled away by that artful chemist.

It is the Devil who holds the threads that move us!
It is in hateful objects that we find peace;
Each day, one step further towards Hell
Without horror, through the stinking shadows.

5

10

15

The Greek
god Hermes
was called
Trismegistus,
meaning
“thrice-
great”—
Baudelaire
here uses it
for Satan
instead

Like a poor sinner who kisses and consumes
The tortured breast of an ancient whore,
We steal in passing a clandestine joy
We squeeze as strongly as a withered fruit. 20

Serried, seething, like a million ants
In our brains riots a Demon horde
And, when we breathe, Death in our lungs
Descends, a sightless river, with deaf moans.

If rape and poison, arson and the knife 25
Have not yet woven their pleasant designs
On the dull canvas of our lowly destinies
It is because our soul, alas, is not yet bold enough!

But among the jackals, panthers and chimerae 30
The monkeys, scorpions, vultures and the snakes
The monsters yelping, shouting, grunting, crawling
In the ill-famed menagerie of all our vices

Is one more ugly, evil, fouler than the rest
Making no grand gestures or great cries
Yet it would gladly lay waste to the earth 35
And with a yawn would swallow up the world

And it is Boredom! Eye laden with involuntary tears,
Dreaming of scaffolds, pulls upon its pipe
You know it, reader, this delicate monster
— Hypocrite reader, — my likeness, — my brother! 40

Au Lecteur

La sottise, l'erreur, le péché, la lésine,
Occupent nos esprits et travaillent nos corps,
Et nous alimentons nos aimables remords,
Comme les mendiants nourrissent leur vermine.

Nos péchés sont têtus, nos repentirs sont lâches; 5
Nous nous faisons payer grassement nos aveux,
Et nous rentrons gaiement dans le chemin bourbeux,
Croyant par de vils pleurs laver toutes nos taches.

Sur l'oreiller du mal c'est Satan Trismégiste 10
Qui berce longuement notre esprit enchanté,
Et le riche métal de notre volonté
Est tout vaporisé par ce savant chimiste.

C'est le Diable qui tient les fils qui nous remuent!
Aux objets répugnants nous trouvons des appas;
Chaque jour vers l'Enfer nous descendons d'un pas, 15
Sans horreur, à travers des ténèbres qui puent.

Ainsi qu'un débauché pauvre qui baise et mange
Le sein martyrisé d'une antique catin,
Nous volons au passage un plaisir clandestin
Que nous pressons bien fort comme une vieille orange. 20

Serré, fourmillant, comme un million d'helminthes,
 Dans nos cerveaux ribote un peuple de Démons,
 Et, quand nous respirons, la Mort dans nos poumons
 Descend, fleuve invisible, avec de sourdes plaintes.

Si le viol, le poison, le poignard, l'incendie, 25
 N'ont pas encor brodé de leurs plaisants dessins
 Le canevas banal de nos piteux destins,
 C'est que notre âme, hélas! n'est pas assez hardie.

Mais parmi les chacals, les panthères, les lices, 30
 Les singes, les scorpions, les vautours, les serpents,
 Les monstres glapissants, hurlants, grognants, rampants,
 Dans la ménagerie infâme de nos vices,

Il en est un plus laid, plus méchant, plus immonde!
 Quoiqu'il ne pousse ni grands gestes ni grands cris,
 Il ferait volontiers de la terre un débris 35
 Et dans un bâillement avalerait le monde;

C'est l'Ennui! L'oeil chargé d'un pleur involontaire,
 Il rêve d'échafauds en fumant son houka.
 Tu le connais, lecteur, ce monstre délicat,—
 Hypocrite lecteur, — mon semblable, — mon frère! 40

A Passer-by

The deafening street roared on. Full, slim, and grand
 In mourning and majestic grief, passed down
 A woman, lifting with a stately hand
 And swaying the black borders of her gown;

Noble and swift, her leg with statues matching; 5
 I drank, convulsed, out of her pensive eye,
 A livid sky where hurricanes were hatching,
 Sweetness that charms, and joy that makes one die.

A lighting-flash — then darkness! Fleeting chance
 Whose look was my rebirth — a single glance! 10
 Through endless time shall I not meet with you?

Far off! too late! or never! — I not knowing
 Who you may be, nor you where I am going —
 You, whom I might have loved, who know it too!

Cats

Both ardent lovers and austere scholars
Love in their mature years
The strong and gentle cats, pride of the house,
Who, like them, are sedentary and sensitive to cold.

Friends of learning and sensual pleasure, 5
They seek the silence and the horror of darkness;
Erebus would have used them as his gloomy steeds:
If their pride could let them stoop to bondage.

Erebus was a
god of the
underworld
in Greek
myth

When they dream, they assume the noble attitudes
Of the mighty sphinxes stretched out in solitude, 10
Who seem to fall into a sleep of endless dreams;

Their fertile loins are full of magic sparks,
And particles of gold, like fine grains of sand,
Spangle dimly their mystic eyes.

Sed non satiata

Latin: "But
not satisfied"

Strange deity, brown as nights,
Whose perfume is mixed with musk and Havanah,
Magical creation, Faust of the savanna,
Sorceress with the ebony thighs, child of black midnights,

Faust
meaning
"sorcerer" or
"magician"

I prefer to African wines, to opium, to burgundy, 5
The elixir of your mouth where love parades itself;
When my desires leave in caravan for you,
Your eyes are the well where my boredom drinks.

From those two great black eyes, chimneys of our spirit,
O pitiless demon, throw out less flame at me; 10
I am no Styx to clasp you nine times,

The river
Styx wound
around the
underworld
nine times

Nor can I, alas, dissolute shrew,
To break your courage, bring you to bay,
Become any Proserpine in the hell of your bed!

Proserpine
(also called
Proserpina
and
Persephone)
was stolen
from the
sunlit Earth
by Hades, the
god of the
underworld,
to become
his wife.

Correspondences

Nature is a temple in which living pillars
Sometimes give voice to confused words;
Man passes there through forests of symbols
Which look at him with understanding eyes.

Like prolonged echoes mingling in the distance 5
In a deep and tenebrous unity,
Vast as the dark of night and as the light of day,
Perfumes, sounds, and colors correspond.

There are perfumes as cool as the flesh of children,
Sweet as oboes, green as meadows— 10
And others are corrupt, and rich, triumphant,

With power to expand into infinity,
Like amber and incense, musk, benzoin,
That sing the ecstasy of the soul and senses.

“Benzoin” is
an aromatic
tree resin
used in
perfumes

Correspondances

La Nature est un temple où de vivants piliers
Laisent parfois sortir de confuses paroles;
L'homme y passe à travers des forêts de symboles
Qui l'observent avec des regards familiers.

Comme de longs échos qui de loin se confondent 5
Dans une ténébreuse et profonde unité,
Vaste comme la nuit et comme la clarté,
Les parfums, les couleurs et les sons se répondent.

Il est des parfums frais comme des chairs d'enfants,
Doux comme les hautbois, verts comme les prairies,— 10
Et d'autres, corrompus, riches et triomphants,

Ayant l'expansion des choses infinies,
Comme l'ambre, le musc, le benjoin et l'encens,
Qui chantent les transports de l'esprit et des sens.

Spleen (LXXVIII)

When the low, heavy sky weighs like a lid
On the groaning spirit, victim of long ennui,
And from the all-encircling horizon
Spreads over us a day gloomier than the night;

When the earth is changed into a humid dungeon, 5
In which Hope like a bat
Goes beating the walls with her timid wings
And knocking her head against the rotten ceiling;

When the rain stretching out its endless train
Imitates the bars of a vast prison 10
And a silent horde of loathsome spiders
Comes to spin their webs in the depths of our brains,

All at once the bells leap with rage
And hurl a frightful roar at heaven,
Even as wandering spirits with no country 15
Burst into a stubborn, whimpering cry.

— And without drums or music, long hearses
Pass by slowly in my soul; Hope, vanquished,
Weeps, and atrocious, despotic Anguish
On my bowed skull plants her black flag. 20

A Voyage to Cythera

My heart like a bird was fluttering joyously
And soaring freely around the rigging;
Beneath a cloudless sky the ship was rolling
Like an angel drunken with the radiant sun.

What is this black, gloomy island? — It's Cythera, 5
They tell us, a country celebrated in song,
The banal Eldorado of old bachelors.
Look at it; after all, it is a wretched land.

— Island of sweet secrets, of the heart's festivals!
The beautiful shade of ancient Venus 10
Hovers above your seas like a perfume
And fills all minds with love and languidness.

Fair isle of green myrtle filled with full-blown flowers
Ever venerated by all nations,
Where the sighs of hearts in adoration 15
Roll like incense over a garden of roses

Or like the eternal cooing of wood-pigeons!—
Cythera was now no more than the barrenest land,
A rocky desert disturbed by shrill cries.
But I caught a glimpse of a singular object! 20

Cythera was
an island
where Venus,
the goddess
of love, was
reputed to
dwell.

El Dorado:
the mythical
land of gold.

It was not a temple in the shade of a grove
 Where the youthful priestess, amorous of flowers,
 Was walking, her body hot with hidden passion,
 Half-opening her robe to the passing breezes;

 But behold! as we passed, hugging the shore 25
 So that we disturbed the sea-birds with our white sails,
 We saw it was a gallows with three arms
 Outlined in black like a cypress against the sky.

 Ferocious birds perched on their feast were savagely
 Destroying the ripe corpse of a hanged man; 30
 Each plunged his filthy beak as though it were a tool
 Into every corner of that bloody putrescence;

 The eyes were two holes and from the gutted belly
 The heavy intestines hung down along his thighs
 And his torturers, gorged with hideous delights, 35
 Had completely castrated him with their sharp beaks.

 Below his feet a pack of jealous quadrupeds
 Prowled with upraised muzzles and circled round and round;
 One beast, larger than the others, moved in their midst
 Like a hangman surrounded by his aides. 40

Cytherean, child of a sky so beautiful,
 You endured those insults in silence
 To expiate your infamous adorations
 And the sins which denied to you a grave.

 Ridiculous hanged man, your sufferings are mine! 45
 I felt at the sight of your dangling limbs
 The long, bitter river of my ancient sorrows
 Rise up once more like vomit to my teeth;

 Before you, poor devil of such dear memory
 I felt all the stabbing beaks of the crows 50
 And the jaws of the black panthers who loved so much
 In other days to tear my flesh to shreds.

 — The sky was charming and the sea was smooth;
 For me thenceforth all was black and bloody,
 Alas! and I had in that allegory 55
 Wrapped up my heart as in a heavy shroud.

 On your isle, O Venus! I found upright only
 A symbolic gallows from which hung my image...
 O, Lord! give me the strength and the courage
 To contemplate my body and soul without loathing! 60

Parisian Dream
To Constantin Guys

I

This morning I am still entranced
By the image, distant and dim,
Of that awe-inspiring landscape
Such as no mortal ever saw.

Sleep is full of miracles! 5
Obeying a curious whim,
I had banned from that spectacle
Irregular vegetation,

And, painter proud of his genius,
I savored in my picture 10
The delightful monotony
Of water, marble, and metal.

Babel of arcades and stairways,
It was a palace infinite,
Full of basins and of cascades 15
Falling on dull or burnished gold,

And heavy waterfalls,
Like curtains of crystal,
Were hanging, bright and resplendent,
From ramparts of metal. 20

Not with trees but with colonnades
The sleeping ponds were encircled;
In these mirrors huge naiads
Admired themselves like women.

Streams of blue water flowed along 25
Between rose and green embankments,
Stretching away millions of leagues
Toward the end of the universe;

There were indescribable stones
And magic waves; there were 30
Enormous glaciers bedazzled
By everything they reflected!

Insouciant and taciturn,
Ganges, in the firmament,
Poured out the treasure of their urns 35
Into chasms made of diamonds.

Architect of my fairyland,
Whenever it pleased me I made
A vanquished ocean flow
Into a tunnel of jewels; 40

And all, even the color black,
Seemed polished, bright, iridescent,
Liquid enchased its own glory
In the crystallized rays of light.

Moreover, no star, no glimmer
Of sun, even at the sky's rim,
Illuminated these marvels
That burned with a personal fire! 45

And over these shifting wonders
Hovered (terrible novelty!
All for the eye, naught for the ear!)
The silence of eternity. 50

II

Opening my eyes full of flames
I saw my miserable room
And felt the cursed blade of care
Sink deep into my heart again; 55

The clock with its death-like accent
Was brutally striking noon;
The sky was pouring down its gloom
Upon the dismal, torpid world. 60

