

Baudelaire's Cruel Charity: Encountering the Poor in the *Petits poèmes en prose*

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“Le vrai saint est celui qui fouette et tue le peuple pour le bien du peuple.” — Baudelaire, *Mon coeur mis à nu*¹

Because he was a profound and ironic critic of nineteenth-century bourgeois society, Charles Baudelaire has become a privileged figure for contemporary Marxist and radical political criticism.² However, what this socially-concerned scholarship frequently overlooks is the fact that one of Baudelaire's central condemnations of his era, namely, his disdain for its mystified optimism in the possibilities of human progress, has a decidedly religious, and particularly Jansenist, foundation.³ The progressive political and social theories of the nineteenth-century were informed by a faith in rationality and a belief in humanity's natural and innate goodness. Thus, these theories, of necessity, denied the principle of original sin. It is because of this that, within the poet's politics and his aesthetics (both of which depended upon the originary division, duality, and difference deriving from the Fall), such theories would fail in practice. Such a position is unequivocally asserted in the conclusion of Baudelaire's review of the masterwork of nineteenth-century progressive idealism, Victor Hugo's

Les Misérables: "Hélas, du Péché originel, même après tant de progrès depuis si longtemps promis, il restera toujours bien assez de traces pour en constater l'immémoriale réalité" (496). For Baudelaire, the progress imagined by the utopian socialists and other reformers of his age was impossible because religion, not "Nature," was the source of human goodness and improvement. In his major essay on aesthetics, "Le peintre de la vie moderne," the poet writes: "c'est la religion qui nous ordonne de nourrir des parents pauvres et infirmes. La nature (qui n'est pas autre chose que la voix de notre intérêt) nous commande de les assommer" (562). In such a view, the practice of charity would be decidedly unnatural.

The adverse effects of abandoning a traditional religious framework to address contemporary social problems are illustrated not only in the critical prose but also in Baudelaire's poetry. Nowhere is the poet's pessimism more apparent than in those poems where he represents encounters with the poor. In these pieces, he parodies his era's abdication of a religious basis for social and moral action. In the poems, this religious renunciation engenders a violent misunderstanding capable of prompting cruelty toward the less fortunate, and, perhaps more seriously for the poet, threatening to produce a complete breakdown in communication. Tellingly, toward the conclusion of his collection of fragmentary aphorisms (later published as the *Fusées*), Baudelaire paraphrases the opening of I Corinthians 13, "Sans la charité je ne suis qu'une cymbale retentissante" (64). The verse in its entirety reads, "If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not charity, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal." Without charity, the writer's words could become meaningless sound. As such, the perversion of charity narrated in Baudelaire's prose poems serves as an ambitious but ambiguous social critique. Just as importantly, it suggests an alternative view of the redemptive possibilities for art in a culture which has abandoned a religious context for social interactions.

There is critical consensus that Baudelaire's interest in reli-

gion and religious systems ought to be understood as motivated by his appreciation of them as primarily aesthetic expressions. As Bernard Howells observes, in Baudelaire's writings, religions are forms of poetry that operate at the collective level and whose appeal is essentially to the imagination ("Les prêtres sont les serviteurs et les sectaires de l'imagination," *OC* 1, 650) because only the imagination can confer coherence upon the fragmentation of experience and enable us to come to terms with the scandalous interdependence of good and evil. (xix-xx)

However, as I hope to argue, with the poems portraying an encounter with the poor in the *Petits poèmes en prose*, Baudelaire appears to test the limits of such an hypothesis. These poems clearly intimate that charity has no place for expression in a purely secular aesthetic, and, moreover, that charity's exclusion is potentially destructive of that aesthetic.

Traditionally, charity, as the mortal reflection of the abundance of God's love, provided the context for the encounter between rich and poor. It celebrated the privileged spiritual status of the poor (who were presumably unimpeded by material desires) and provided a vehicle for the fortunate to redeem themselves through acts of kindness. In his enigmatic prose poems, the poet depicts a world where the expression of this more customary charitable model is challenged by the variety of modern secular discourses available to represent the encounter between rich and poor. The poems experiment with the range of genres of discourse for articulating an exchange between classes, including those of contemporary popular literature, economics and even the nascent discipline of sociology. The poems' feckless protagonists attempt to apply these discourses to read and communicate their encounter with the less fortunate. However, in each case, this strategy is implicitly condemned as a corruption of traditional Christian charity, underscoring the failure of any kind of "progress" and the consequent difficulty of communication between the classes. Without

charity, the "progressive" bourgeois narrators in Baudelaire's poems cannot speak to or about the poor.

Although poems such as "Les yeux des pauvres," "Le vieux saltimbanque," "Le joujou du pauvre," or "Le gâteau" each demonstrates the tensions between the "progressive," secular, and traditional religious representations of poverty, I want to concentrate on two of the most extraordinary poems depicting an explicit miscarriage of charity, "La fausse monnaie" and "Assommons les pauvres!" In these pieces, the collapse of charity signifies the ethical depravity of the poems' bourgeois protagonists, and, furthermore, creates narratives which enact the consequent disintegration of social and aesthetic linguistic exchanges. This disintegration is evidenced not by an absence of significance for the encounter, but paradoxically through a proliferation of its potential implications. The poems' narrators (and, by extension, their readers as well) must struggle to fix the meaning of an event which, outside of the parameters provided by the conventional theology of charity, threatens to become meaningless through the very multiplicity of possible secular meanings.

Such a textual economy of excess is clearly evidenced in "La fausse monnaie." In this poem, charity is superseded first by literary and then by modern economic models for framing the meeting of rich and poor. The poem opens already suggesting a breakdown in comprehension. The speaker begins by describing the manner in which his friend, upon leaving a tobacconist, arranges his loose change according to a system which appears inscrutable:

Comme nous nous éloignons du bureau de tabac,
mon ami fit un soigneux triage de sa monnaie; dans
la poche gauche de son gilet il glissa de petites
pièces d'or; dans la droite, de petites pièces d'ar-
gent; dans la poche gauche de sa culotte, un masse
de gros sols, et enfin, dans la droite, une pièce d'ar-
gent de deux francs qu'il avait particulièrement
examinée. (168)

The narrator is at a loss to interpret his friend's curious financial meticulousness, merely remarking, "«Singulière et minutieuse répartition!»" (168).

This reflection is instantly interrupted by the appearance of a beggar, who timidly extends his cap. The speaker comments:

Je ne connais rien de plus inquiétant que l'éloquence muette de ces yeux suppliants, qui contiennent à la fois, *pour l'homme sensible qui sait y lire*, tant d'humilité, tant de reproches. Il trouve quelque chose approchant cette profondeur de sentiment compliqué, dans les yeux larmoyants des chiens qu'on fouette. (168, my emphasis)

The beggar evokes pity and guilt, precisely the effects prescribed by the literature of sensibility, one of the dominant nineteenth-century genres for writing about the poor. The sentimental mode emphasizes the salutary emotional effects of an encounter with the pathetic for the privileged perceiver, usually at the expense of advocating any comprehensive social action. Baudelaire's description participates in and critiques this sentimentality. The well-read speaker peruses the eloquent eyes of the literally silent beggar and sees in them an excess of emotions which are but the mirror of his own. However, he also likens the tear-filled eyes to those of a beaten dog. The comparison immediately unmasks the condescending and uncharitable devices of sentimental description by transgressing the decorum of sentimental rhetoric, exceeding it, even while pointing to its true effects. By using the encounter with the poor for his own catharsis, the sentimental speaker does symbolic violence to the beggar.

Curiously, the actual moment of charity is not described in the poem. It is removed from the text, as if to suggest that such an action is already excluded from the scope of representation. The narrative jumps to the moment immediately *after* the giving of alms, as the speaker remarks upon the excessiveness of his friend's donation. He is unable to understand his friend's apparent generosity which has become an anomaly in the world of the text. The

speaker's comment reveals his incomprehension as he struggles to interpret his friend's gift, for the magnanimous offering surpasses the limits of the sentimental encounter. The narrator can only reply to his friend: "Vous avez raison; après le plaisir d'être étonné, il n'en est pas de plus grand que celui de causer une surprise" (168). Because it is no longer the standard, charity has become astonishing. The speaker attempts to understand what has transpired by framing it in terms of its aesthetic effects, for surprise and shock are definitive qualities of Baudelaire's concept of the beautiful. Baudelaire writes in the *Salon de 1859*, "[t]oute la question, si vous exigez que je vous confère le titre d'artiste ou d'amateur des beaux-arts, est donc de savoir par quels procédés vous voulez créer ou sentir l'étonnement" (395). In "Le peintre de la vie moderne," surprise is a characteristic effect of the dandy, one of Baudelaire's privileged figures for the modern artist. The speaker in the poem wishes to master the surprise caused by his friend's gesture, perhaps to show himself as much a dandy as his friend, by affirming their aesthetic "doctrine" which privileges "le plaisir d'étonner et la satisfaction orgueilleuse de ne jamais être étonné" (560). The poem's narrator can do so not by explaining why or how the gesture is surprising, but merely by commenting upon its "appropriateness." He reads his friend's gesture as a dandy's desire to provoke surprise, a "literary" device that induces a temporary suspension of interpretation.

It is at this point that the real surprise is revealed. The friend quickly interjects, "C'était la pièce fausse" (168). However, instead of being appalled by such an admission, the speaker grows more enthralled. He excitedly continues to interpret his friend's actions based upon what he presumes to be their motives. Yet, as the text reveals, these presumptions are grounded in the speaker's own imaginative proclivities:

Mais dans mon misérable cerveau, toujours occupé à chercher midi à quatorze heures (de quelle fatigante faculté la nature m'a fait cadeau!) entra soudainement cette idée qu'une pareille conduite, de

la part de mon ami, n'était excusable que par le désir de créer un événement dans la vie de ce pauvre diable, peut-être même de connaître les conséquences diverses, funestes ou autres, que peut engendrer une pièce fausse dans la main d'un mendiant. Ne pouvait-elle pas se multiplier en pièces vraies? ne pouvait-elle pas aussi le conduire en prison? Un cabaretier, un boulanger, par exemple, allait peut-être le faire arrêter comme faux monnayeur ou comme propagateur de fausse monnaie. Tout aussi bien la pièce fausse serait peut-être, pour un pauvre petit spéculateur, le germe d'une richesse de quelques jours. Et ainsi ma fantaisie allait son train, prêtant des ailes à l'esprit de mon ami et tirant toutes les déductions possibles de toutes les hypothèses possibles. (168)

The speaker, once again transposing the situation into a literary framework and "reading" the "work" of his friend, the "author" of these possible stories, speculates upon possible denouements. The false coin, which has no value in itself, puts into circulation two central plots: first, the beggar's temporary enrichment and, second, his arrest and imprisonment. These two plots are, in microcosm, those of another prevalent nineteenth-century form of writing about the poor — the popular prose fiction of the *roman feuilletons*. The speaker summarizes both the "rags to riches" tale which narrates the pauper's economic integration into capitalist society, and the criminal plot, derived from the tradition of the *littérature de la gueuserie*, which tells of the pauper's transgression of bourgeois law to reaffirm that law. These two stories are as ultimately unmerciful as the sentimental story of the third paragraph and also suggest their own critique. They indicate that any depiction of the poor man, through the creation of an event that would make him "worthy" of literary representation, derives from a reading that falsely sentimentalizes or sensationalizes his existence. Such a reading becomes equated in the poem with a cruel and dishonest gesture.

Only by being victimized can the beggar find representation in literary discourse. The image of the poor which gets circulated by both the sentimental poetic and the sensationalist prose literature parodied in the text is rendered the symbolic equivalent of a counterfeit coin. It is effective and can circulate precisely because it is capable of (temporarily) passing itself off as the truth, or the true representation of poverty. Baudelaire appears to be suggesting that without charity to explain, inform, and guide the understanding of poverty and human suffering, the story of the beggar is appropriated by aesthetic models of value which profit by misrepresentation. The speaker in the poem masters the meaning of the encounter through recourse to literary forms which reveal his (and hence our own, as readers of such texts) *Schadenfreude*.

However, the speaker's tentative mastery of the literary meaning of the event is challenged when his friend interrupts his reverie to repeat the speaker's original interpretation of the event. The friend remarks: "«Oui, vous avez raison; il n'est pas de plaisir plus doux que de surprendre un homme en lui donnant plus qu'il n'espère»" (168). The friend, as "author," identifies his intention as giving a man more than he had expected. To which man, however, is the friend referring? Both the speaker and the beggar are, in a sense, "victims" of the false coin. Both are given more than they hoped: the beggar in specious currency, the speaker in specious aesthetic significance. It may be the speaker's realization that he has been duped by the very system of interpretation he has imposed that motivates his condemnation of his friend in the final paragraph. In gazing into the eyes of his friend, as he had done with the beggar, the speaker claims suddenly to see in them an "incontestable candor" — a lack of suggestiveness that evokes a banality antithetical to the literary stories the narrator has invented.

The narrator then announces that his friend's actions were motivated by the basest of economic calculations: "Je vis alors clairement qu'il avait voulu faire à la fois la charité et une bonne affaire; gagner quarante sols et le coeur de Dieu; emporter le paradis économiquement" (169). For the narrator, his friend's charity

is no more than another commercial investment. The friend's motives were mercenary, not literary. This realization incurs the speaker's moral indignation. Yet his condemnation of his friend derives from aesthetic, not religious, principles.

Je lui aurais presque pardonné le désir de la criminelle jouissance dont je le supposais tout à l'heure capable; j'aurais trouvé curieux, singulier, qu'il s'amusât à compromettre les pauvres; mais je ne lui pardonnerai jamais l'ineptie de son calcul. (169)

Had the friend palmed off the false coin to amuse himself in compromising the poor, the speaker might have forgiven him. After all, this would have led to an interesting and singular story. However, as the friend's incentives were purely financial, the interaction becomes, for the speaker, another example of bourgeois stupidity. The speaker concludes, extending the poem's paradoxical moral: "On n'est jamais excusable d'être méchant, mais il y a quelque mérite à savoir qu'on l'est; et le plus irréparable des vices est de faire le mal par bêtise" (169). Only a self-consciously "artistic" intent, a desire to imperil the lives of the poor in order to invent an interesting story, could be excused. But even then, the poem poses the question as to whether this too is at all preferable. The options, in the world of the text, are limited, but Baudelaire's overtly ironized depiction of the poem's malicious narrator creates a space for the reader to hope for other possibilities. It is predominantly through the characterization of the speaker and in the miscarriage of charity that the poem critiques the techniques for the literary representations of poverty even as it employs them. As such, Baudelaire evokes, in its very absence from the text, a *different* plot within the repetitions of the same stories and the same forms. Popular literary discourses may supply the only interesting site for the representation of (a perversion of) charity, yet the poem simultaneously seems to imply that this is by no means the happiest alternative.

The literary and capitalist economic frameworks for presenting an encounter with the poor are not the only ones that

Baudelaire explores and exploits. Nowhere is the question of poverty more ambivalently represented than in the penultimate piece of *Le Spleen de Paris*, the complex and vexing "Assomons les pauvres!" Of all the poems in which Baudelaire depicts the poor, none has received such contradictory interpretations, some damning the poet as the perpetrator of the most sinister and reactionary cynicism, and others portraying him as a revolutionary political activist. The poem depicts the most uncharitable of all the encounters, but also the only nearly complete circuit of charity. Does Baudelaire present his protagonist as an unwitting *agent provocateur*, a Satanic liberator who jolts the working classes out of their political apathy? Or are his narrator's cruel actions a fantasy for the return of the reactionary repressed? Is the text entirely ironic and, if so, what are the implications of such an interpretive claim. In the *Fusées*, Baudelaire writes: "L'esprit de bouffonnerie peut ne pas exclure la charité, mais c'est rare" (624). Whether or not this poem is one of those rare instances is key to any interpretation.

Given the poem's placement in the collection of the *Petits poèmes en prose*, and its reinscription of the motifs found in Baudelaire's other poems about the poor, one might expect it to provide a summative statement or synthesis. It does embed intertextually issues raised by the other texts. However, despite the "conclusion" of the poem, which presents itself with the force and assurance of a resolution lacking in the previous pieces, it is even more difficult to unravel than its predecessors. A kind of charity occurs, but the reader is left wondering, again, if its ultimate execution reflects any kind of improvement or "progress" beyond the interchange afforded by the traditional religious framework. In order to explore the causes and consequences of the poem's complex and ultimately degenerate representation of charity, it is helpful to begin an explication through outlining its invocations and citations of Baudelaire's other prose poems about the poor. Such a reading should show that "Assomons les pauvres!" does not yield a categorical conclusion for the problem of the writing and repre-

sentation of charity. Instead, it intimates that the aesthetic and discursive predicaments of representing charity outside a conventional religious paradigm may be unavoidable. More troubling for the poet, it might also insinuate that, at least in this particular case, art proves itself to be a poor substitute for religion.

The incident of the poem occurs 16 or 17 years earlier, thus, from the date of composition, taking place in 1848 — the year in which Baudelaire himself was his most politically active, fighting on the revolutionary barricades. The poem's protagonist, however, is not engaged in any public action. He has spent two weeks secluded in his room, reading the works of utopian socialists: "je veux parler des livres où il est traité de l'art de rendre les peuples heureux, sages et riches, en vingt-quatre heures" (182). The speaker figures his relationship to these books in an alimentary fashion: "J'avais donc digéré, — avalé, veux-je dire, — toutes les élucubrations de tous ces entrepreneurs de bonheur public" (182). He has consumed these texts indiscriminately, digesting books that contradict each other: some advise the poor to make themselves slaves and others convince them that they are dethroned kings. His reading, thus, does not lead him to any insight and he is unable to analyze and synthesize: "On ne trouvera pas surprenant que je fusse alors dans un état d'esprit avoisinant le vertige ou la stupidité" (182).

After glutting himself with the discourses of idealist political philosophy, the speaker leaves his room not with the impulse to take action, but to attend to his own physical needs: "Car le goût passionné des mauvaises lectures engendre un besoin proportionnel du grand air et des rafraîchissants" (182). This scene of reading is broken by a need for fresh air and food, as also occurs in "Le gâteau." In "Le gâteau," the speaker's lyrical reading of his figurative affinity with the landscape is interrupted by hunger and thirst:

Bref, je me sentais, grâce à l'enthousiasmante beauté dont j'étais environné, en parfaite paix avec moi-même et avec l'univers; je crois même que,

dans ma parfaite béatitude et dans mon total oubli de tout le mal terrestre, j'en étais venu à ne plus trouver si ridicules les journaux qui prétendent que l'homme est né bon. (157)

Paradoxically, in "Le gâteau," lyric idealization induces the speaker to reflect on journalistic platitudes which have misrepresented another important work of social philosophy. Rousseau's reveries are conflated with the prosaic information of newspapers. The belief that man is born good, an argument appropriated from Rousseau by the hated propagandists of progress, is furthermore a direct denial of original sin. Curiously in this poem what allows the speaker to accept such a proposition is his attainment of lyric beatitude. The lyric, then, confirms the social and the prosaic. But the interruption of another discursive code inalterably halts the idealizing sublimation and the sentence cited above continues without break to initiate the question of *material* need. The speaker has just approached a sublime apotheosis — which confirms newspaper reports — "quand, la matière incurable renouvelant ses exigences, je songeai à réparer la fatigue et à soulager l'appétit causés par une si longue ascension" (157).

In "Assomons les pauvres!," however, the encroachment of such needs are not the result of the transcendental transport of a poetic interpretation of nature, but of a confusion resulting from a literal reading of the polemics of social theory. Nonetheless, both discursive contexts, because they cause hunger, are equated as "bad reading." The interruption of hunger into both scenes of reading indicates that their respective discourses of idealism are equally corrupt. Neither the lyric idealization nor the idealism of the utopian socialists posits any relationship to the real. Reality is recalled to the speaker by physical needs. However, in "Assomons les pauvres!" the misguided reading has further engendered in the speaker, a "germe obscur," "l'idée d'une idée, quelque chose d'infiniment vague" (182). Here, the speaker resembles the protagonist of "Le mauvais vitrier" and the identity grows stronger as the piece progresses. He is a contemplative individual, susceptible to inex-

pliable urges whose motivations and effects are shrouded in an ambivalence which the text merely complicates.

Onto this scene, which already evokes two prior poems, the beggar appears as he did in "La fausse monnaie." The encounter occurs outside of a cabaret, as it does in "Les yeux des pauvres." As with the previous poems, the speaker reads the glance of the silent beggar, "un mendiant me tendit son chapeau, avec un de ces regards inoubliables" (182). In this case, however, the gaze does not provoke a sentimental reaction or indicate an aesthetic appreciation as it did in the previous texts. It bespeaks violent and political manifestations. His glance might topple thrones, an effect that the speaker simultaneously qualifies as impossible: "un de ces regards inoubliables qui culbuteraient les trônes, si l'esprit remuait la matière" (182). At the same time as the speaker "reads" the more menacing look of the beggar, he hears a voice: "c'était celle d'un bon Ange, ou d'un bon Démon, qui m'accompagne partout" (182). As in "Le mauvais vitrier," the uncertain origin of the voice highlights the moral ambivalence of the entire poem. Are the speaker's subsequent actions good or evil? Is the speaker liberating the pauper or merely transposing and reproducing the same oppression? The speaker then likens his demon to the demon of Socrates, raising consequent interpretive dilemmas, and invoking yet another possible intertext, one both social and aesthetic. Such an analogy at once affirms and denies a potential public effect for poetry. In the *Ion*, Socrates characterizes poets as "not in their senses." The poet is unable to compose until he is inspired, "and is beside himself and reason is no longer in him" (220). The poet's *ekstasis* makes him an easy caricature in the dialogue, but it is precisely what excludes him from the *Republic*. In the *Republic*, the poet is exiled because of his potential to corrupt the rational ideas upon which the city is founded. Thus, although in the *Ion*, Socrates dismisses poets as "light, airy things," their banishment from the city underscores the strength of their potential threat. For Socrates, as for Baudelaire, the relevance of art to social transformation remains uncertain.

The ambiguous demon's message grows overtly political, challenging the ideological foundations of republican society: "Celui-là seul est l'égal d'un autre, qui le prouve, et celui-là seul est digne de liberté, qui sait la conquérir»" (183). Liberty and equality are not, according to the demon, *natural* rights. Taking this statement as "mock-utopian," many of Baudelaire's Marxist readers have used the proposition and its consequent action to interpret the speaker as a liberator who impels the people to realize their oppression and encourages them to aggressively retaliate. This reading is sustained by the knowledge that part of the reason for Baudelaire's disgust and disillusionment with revolutionary politics after 1851 was due to his belief in the complicity of the lower classes in their own persecution. However tempting this interpretation might be to readers who wish to reform Baudelaire as a radical, it must be remembered that, in the poem, the speaker's application of his theories does not claim to incite a revolution from *en bas*. The type of justice which prevails is not republican but ultimately archaic and, surprisingly, Biblical.

The description of the speaker's efforts at putting his theory into praxis — his grisly attack on the beggar — deploys the detailed, "objective" exactitude of scientific prose. As such, Baudelaire subtly cites and imitates what was at the time an increasingly significant discourse for writing about the poor — that of the recently-developed science of sociology. As in "Le gâteau" and "Le mauvais vitrier" this encounter with poverty grows decisively unpoetic:

Ayant ensuite, par un coup de pied lancé dans le dos, assez énergique pour briser les omoplates, terrassé ce sexagénaire affaibli, je me saisis d'une grosse branche d'arbre qui traînait à terre, et je le battis avec l'énergie obstinée des cuisiniers qui veulent attendrir un beefsteak. (183)

Beating the beggar, the speaker accomplishes a most unlyrical metaphor, equating the beggar with a piece of meat. The beggar cannot be figuratively "consumed" as a textual commodity or as the

speaker's equal until he has been pulverized into an identification. The speaker's previous diet of texts of progressive utopian socialism (because they insist everyone resemble everyone else) has left him with a delicate stomach. As in "La fausse monnaie," "Le vieux saltimbanque," or "Le mauvais vitrier," the socially marginal must undergo a destructive transformation to "fit" into the literary text.

This conversion is completed only when the beggar strikes back. Returning an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth, the beggar symbolically responds to his manipulation in a parody of Old Testament justice, perhaps physically commenting on the inherent damage done by all secular discourses of poverty, sentimental or sensationalist, in literature and social theory. The last two paragraphs of the piece prove the richest and most difficult:

Alors, je lui fis force signes pour lui faire comprendre que je considérais la discussion comme finie, et me relevant avec la satisfaction d'un sophiste du Portique, je lui dis: «Monsieur, *vous êtes mon égal!* veuillez me faire l'honneur de partager avec moi ma bourse; et souvenez-vous, si vous êtes réellement philanthrope, qu'il faut appliquer à tous vos confrères, quand il vous demanderont l'aumône, la théorie que j'ai eu la *douleur* d'essayer sur votre dos.»

Il m'a bien juré qu'il avait compris ma théorie, et qu'il obéirait à mes conseils. (183)

The speaker and beggar finally communicate, using signs that indicate that the "discussion" is finished. However, the blatant misnaming of the skirmish indicates that perhaps the only communication possible between the two classes is a nonsensical violence. Does the poem then conclude that the only way to represent poverty, outside of the traditional narrative of charity, is to do it violence? It is important to note that the pauper's entrance as a textual "equal" occurs only after he has repeated the action of the speaker by retaliating. Even if he is capable of authoring his own actions, they are still a repetition of those of the bourgeois "author."

Once again, the speaker's final address to the beggar highlights the irony of the entire text. It confirms that the prospect of equality between beggar and speaker can only occur through a violent (and failed) attempt to eradicate difference. Violence allows the speaker to *share* his purse equally with the beggar. Charity, of a sort, occurs, but only after a battle which reaffirms hierarchical differences. Baudelaire's political readers have interpreted this outcome as a critique of the hypocrisy of bourgeois charity, and this position is certainly defensible. The speaker admonishes the beggar to "go and do likewise," and the beggar "agrees" to replicate the speaker's charity, unlike the savage creatures of "Le gâteau." However, the beggar is to apply this theory of charity only to his *confrères*. Such a lesson dramatically contradicts the opinions of those readers who argue that the poem advocates a revolution from below. Because the beggar is asked to inflict the lesson upon others of his class, the battle is incited not among classes, but within one. The speaker and the beggar are not in fact equal, for the speaker maintains the superior position of advisor, offering "conseils" much in the same fashion of the indigestible social tracts of the first paragraph, "qui conseillent à tous les pauvres de se faire esclaves et de ceux qui leur persuadent qu'ils sont tous les rois détrônés" (182). The beggar has agreed to "obey," remaining in a subservient position. The success of this act of charity occurs only through the circuitous reestablishment of difference.

As is often noted, the last word in this text has, literally, been erased. The final line of the poem, absent from the published version (and whether this was the work of the author or of his editors remains unknown) is, "[q]u'en dis-tu, citoyen Proudhon?" Indeed, the poem as a whole can be read as a response to Proudhon, about whom Baudelaire was nothing if not ambivalent. Whatever else became of the poet's early liberal leanings, he maintained a difficult respect for the father of modern anarchy even after his "physical depoliticization."⁴ More importantly by originally ending in a question, which may or may not have been intentionally elided, the poem subverts its apparent conclusiveness. Such a question would

render the poem's critique of the discourse of social theory even more explicit.

It is uncertain why Baudelaire may have elected to shift the tone of the poem through the alteration to its ending. However, it is certain that such a choice increases the poem's interpretive ambiguity, creating, once again, an excess of possible meanings. In this poem, the representation of charity is confounded through its displacement into the discourses of social theory, philosophy, and sociology. Nevertheless, just as in "La fausse monnaie," where charity was problematized by its articulation within literary and economic modes, the results are ultimately the same. While the poems do not explicitly nostalgize or invoke a return to a conventional religious vision for the charitable encounter, the notable absence of religion as a way to understand and depict this encounter remains suggestive. Recall Baudelaire's paraphrase of St. Paul, "[s]ans la charité, je ne suis qu'une cymbale retentissante." If one cannot speak, cannot communicate without charity, and charity, in the prose poems, has become essentially unrepresentable except through inadequate secular discourses, then communication, literary and otherwise, could be threatened. However "progressive" these discourses might claim to be, they are incapable of articulating or representing one of the nineteenth century's most troubling social crises. Perhaps more difficult for Baudelaire, at least in these instances, art may offer no better alternative. Baudelaire's poetic portrait of the problems of poverty may be superior only in its ability to indicate the poet's inability, outside of a religious framework, to charitably narrate an encounter between rich and poor.

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Notes

1 Charles Baudelaire, *Oeuvres Complètes* (Paris: Seuil, 1968), 625. All further selections will be taken from this edition.

2 Twentieth-century political readings of Baudelaire begin with the important work of Walter Benjamin. Other useful studies include those of T.J. Clark, Richard Terdiman, Jonathan Monroe, among others, and more recently, Richard D.E. Burton and Gretchen Van Slyke.

3 Particularly later in his life, Baudelaire wrote frequently of his disdain for the concept of "progress." Indeed, his notion of the political and economic circumstances inimical to the creation of poetry may be generalized under the aegis of progress. As he writes in the *Salon de 1859*: "La poésie et le progrès sont deux ambitieux qui se haïssent d'une haine instinctive, et, quand ils se rencontrent dans le même chemin, il faut que l'un des deux serve l'autre" (396). Baudelaire's antipathy to progress is evidenced adamantly in the *Exposition universelle de 1855*:

Il est encore une erreur fort à la mode, de laquelle je veux me garder comme de l'enfer. — Je veux parler de l'idée du progrès Cette idée grotesque, qui a fleuri sur le terrain pourri de la fatuité moderne, a déchargé chacun de son devoir, délivré toute âme de sa responsabilité, dégagé la volonté de tous les liens que lui imposait l'amour du beau. (363)

The poet's disgust for progress is so great that he heaps upon it his most scathing insult: it is perfectly *Belgian*. *Baudelaire notes*, "La croyance au progrès est une doctrine de parasite, une doctrine de *Belges*" (632).

4 Richard D. E. Burton's excellent reading demonstrates that the poem is "at once a celebration, parody, and subversion of the Proudhonian theory and practice of mutualism" (*Baudelaire and the Second Republic* 345). Mutualism called for the direct exchange of goods and services between equal producers, at their real value, without the mediation of social institutions such as banks or the state which artificially inflated prices or the costs of

exchange. Proudhon thus proposed the establishment of a People's Bank which would lend paper money (exchangeable only for goods or services) without interest, thereby driving other banks out of business and eventually resulting in the collapse of national government itself, without, however, any violence. As Burton comments:

while "Assommons les pauvres!" sends up the Proudhonian ideal of unmediated reciprocal exchange by precipitating an exchange of evils rather than of good(s), the net result of the narrator's theory and practice of "negative mutuality" is, or appears to be, identical to the goals of "positive mutuality" as propounded by Proudhon, namely the creation of liberty, equality, and fraternity between the two parties to the exchange which is no less real for having been sealed by reciprocal violence: out of the exchange of evils, an apparently positive good has been born. (348)

Mutualism may have appeared to Baudelaire as the prerequisite for a social condition which would transcend the tensions of identity and difference that were the paradoxical roots of the dilemmas of literary discourse, democratic politics and capitalist economy. It was a practical translation of the poetic ideal of *correspondance*. Yet it may have been because the prerequisite for Proudhon's economic theorems was an atheistic denial of original sin that led to Baudelaire's uncertain advocacy.

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