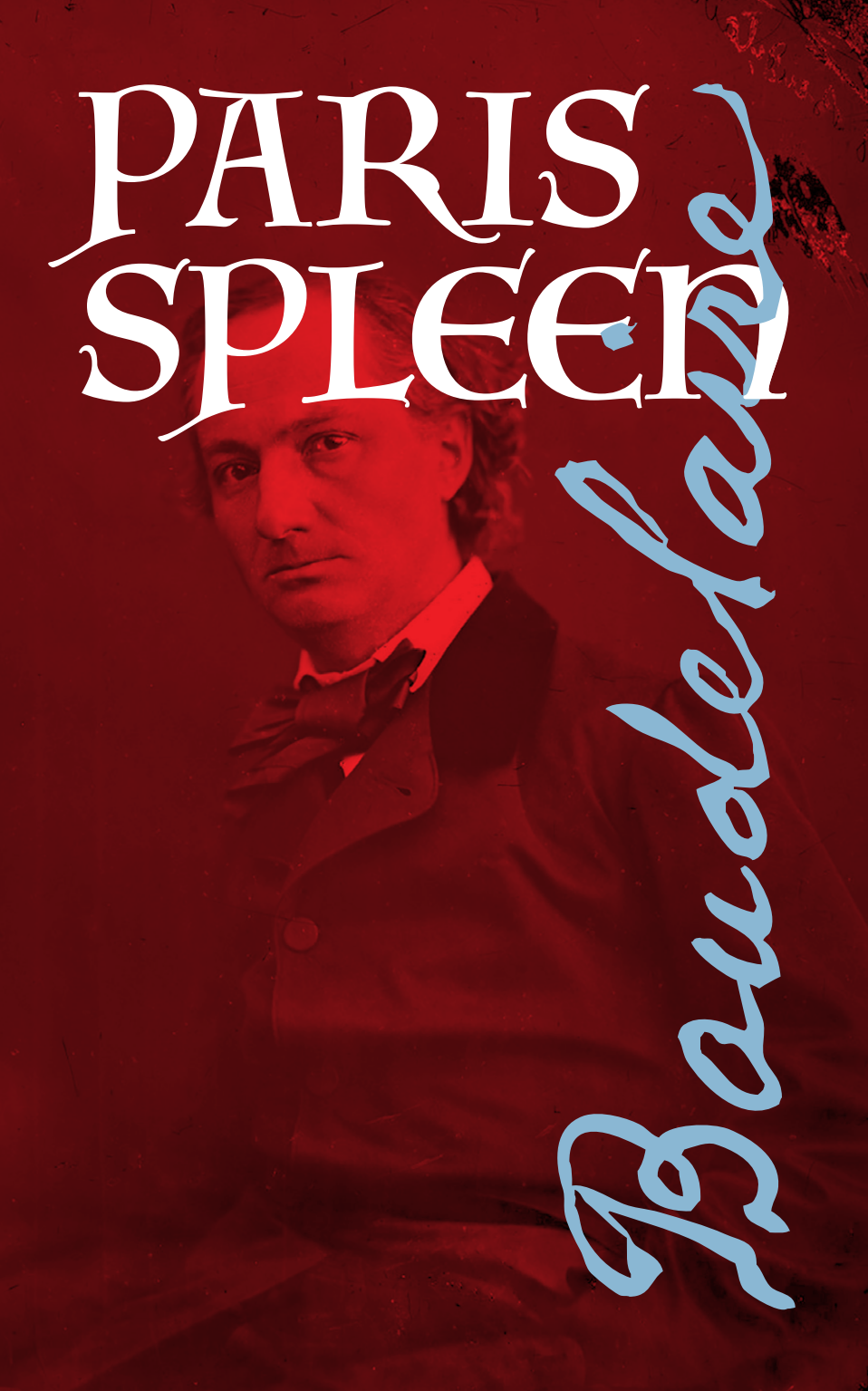


PARIS SPLÉEN

Baudelaire



Baudelaire, already entirely German, except for a
certain hyper-erotic ailment that smells of Paris

— Nietzsche, *Nachlass* 34 [21] (April–June 1885)

Old Paris is no more (the form of a city
Changes much faster, alas! than the heart of a mortal)

— Baudelaire, “The Swan”

I have so little liking for the world of the living,
that I would gladly write only for the dead...

— Baudelaire, *Artificial Paradises*

To Giovanna, my Venus

PETITS POÈMES EN PROSE

A. ARSENE HOUSSAYE

Mon cher ami, je vous envoie un petit ouvrage dont on ne pourrait pas dire, sans injustice, qu'il n'a ni queue ni tête, puisque tout, au contraire, y est à la fois tête et queue, alternativement et réciproquement. Considérez, je vous prie, quelles admirables commodités cette combinaison nous offre à tous, à vous, à moi et au lecteur. Nous pouvons couper où nous voulons, moi ma rêverie, vous le manuscrit, le lecteur sa lecture; car je ne suspends pas la volonté rétive de celui-ci au fil interminable d'une intrigue superflue. Enlevez une vertèbre, et les deux morceaux de cette tortueuse fantaisie se rejoindront sans peine. Hachez-la en nombreux fragments, et vous verrez que chacun peut exister à part. Dans l'espérance que quelques-uns de ces tronçons seront assez vivants pour vous plaire et vous amuser, j'ose vous dédier le serpent tout entier.

J'ai une petite confession à vous faire. C'est en feuilletant, pour la vingtième fois au moins, le fameux *Gaspard de la Nuit*, d'Aloysius Bertrand (un livre connu de vous, de moi et de quelques-uns de nos amis, n'a-t-il pas tous les droits à être appelé fameux?), que l'idée m'est venue de tenter quelque chose d'analogue, et d'appliquer à la description de la vie moderne ou plutôt d'une vie moderne et plus abstraite, le procédé qu'il avait appliqué à la peinture de la vie ancienne; si étrangement pittoresque.

Quel est celui de nous qui ses jours d'ambition, rêvé le prose poétique, musicale sans rime, assez souple et pour s'adapter aux mouvements de l'âme, aux ondulations aux soubresauts de la conscience?

C'est surtout de la fréquence les énormes, c'est du croisement innombrables rapports que obsédant. Vous-même, monvez-vous pas tenté de traduire son le cri strident du *Vitrier* dans une prose lyrique toutes suggestions que ce cri en mansardes, à travers les plumes de la rue?

Mais, pour dire le vrai, je jalousie ne m'ait pas porté que j'eus commencé le travail que non-seulement je retire de mon mystérieux et bruyant mais encore que je faisais (si cela peut s'appeler que singulièrement différent, accablant autre que moi s'enorgueillissant mais qui ne peut qu'humilier un esprit qui regarde comme un honneur du poète d'accomplir un projeté de faire.

— Votre bien

I

L'Étranger.

— Qui aimes-tu le mieux, ma chère amie, la vie antique, dis? Tes parents, ton frère?

— Je n'ai ni parents, ni soeur, ni frère.
— Tes amis?

n'a pas, dans
miracle d'une
ans rythme et
assez heurtée
nents lyriques
de la rêverie,
ence ?

atation des vil-
ment de leurs
naît cet idéal
cher ami, n'a-
re en une chan-
; et d'exprimer
les désolantes
voie jusqu'aux
us hautes bru-

crains que ma
bonheur. Sitôt
ail, je m'aper-
étais bien loin
illiant modèle,
quelque chose
leque chose) de
ident dont tout
rait sans doute,
r profondément
e le plus grand
ir juste ce qu'il

affectionné,
C. B.

, homme énig-
ta sœur ou ton
eur, ni frère.

— Vous vous servez là d'une parole dont
le sens m'est resté jusqu'à ce jour inconnu.

— Ta patrie ?

— J'ignore sous quelle latitude elle est
située.

— La beauté ?

— Je l'aimerais volontiers, déesse et im-
mortelle.

— L'argent ?

— Je le hais comme vous haïssez Dieu.

— Eh ! qu'aimes-tu donc, extraordinaire
étranger ?

— J'aime les nuages... les nuages qui
passent... là bas... là bas... les merveil-
leux nuages !

II

Le Désespoir de la vieille.

La petite vieille ratatinée se sentit toute
réjouie en voyant ce joli enfant à qui cha-
cun faisait fête, à qui tout le monde voulait
plaire ; ce joli être, si fragile comme elle,
la petite vieille, et, comme elle aussi, sans
dents et sans cheveux.

Et elle s'approcha de lui, voulant lui
faire des risettes et des mines agréables.

Mais l'enfant épouvanté se débattait sous
les caresses de la bonne femme décrépite,
et remplissait la maison de ses glapisse-
ments.

Alors la bonne vieille se retira dans sa
solitude éternelle, et elle pleurait dans un
coin, se disant : « Ah ! pour nous, malheu-
reuses vieilles femmes, l'âge est passé de
plaire, même aux innocents, et nous fai-
sons horreur aux petits enfants que nous
voulons aimer !

III

Le Confiteur de l'Artiste.

Que les fins de journées d'au... sont
pénétrantes ! Ah ! pénétrante
douleur ! car il est de certa
délicieuses dont le vague n
tensité, et il n'est pas de p
que celle de l'Infini.

Grand déli
gard dans l'i
Solitude, sil
de l'azur, u
l'horizon, et
isolement, ir
tence, mélod
tes ces chose
par elles (car
rie, le moi se
dis-je, mais
ment, sans ai
déductions.

Toutefois,
de moi ou s'é
bientôt trop i
lupté crée un
sitive. Mes n
plus que des
reuses.

Et mainten
consterne ; si
sensibilité de
tacle me révo
ment souffrir
Nature, enchi
jours victorie
tenter mes dé
du beau est
frayeur avant

C'était l'ex
de boue et de
rosses, étinc
bons, grouille
poirs, délire
pour troubler
fort.

Au milieu
rme, un à
un malot
comme l'â
poir, un l
ement

CHARLES BAUDELAIRE

PARIS SPLEEN

CHARLES BAUDELAIRE

PARIS SPLEEN

Translated by

Rainer J. Hanshe



Contra Mundum Press New York · London · Melbourne

Translation of *Paris Spleen*

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—1st Contra Mundum Press
Edition

First Contra Mundum Press
edition 2021.

216 pp., 5 × 8 in.

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ISBN 9781940625454

- I. Baudelaire, Charles.
- II. Title.
- III. Hanshe, Rainer J.
- IV. Translator.
- V. Hanshe, Rainer J.
- VI. Translator's Note.

2020950656

Library of Congress
Cataloguing-in-Publication
Data

Baudelaire, Charles, 1821–1867

[Spleen de Paris. English.]

Paris Spleen / Charles
Baudelaire;

Translated from the French
by Rainer J. Hanshe

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PARIS SPLEEN

I

THE STRANGER

- Whom do you love best, enigmatic man, say?
your father, your mother, your sister, or your brother?
- I have no father, no mother, no sister, no brother.
- Your friends?
- You are using a word whose meaning has remained unknown to me to this day.
- Your homeland?
- I don't know at what latitude it is located.
- Beauty?
- I would love her, Goddess and Immortal.
- Gold?
- I hate it as you hate God.
- Eh! what do you love, then, extraordinary stranger?
- I love the clouds ... the passing clouds ... up there ... up there ... the marvelous clouds!
-

II

THE OLD WOMAN'S DESPAIR

The small, wrinkled old woman felt very happy when she saw this pretty child whom everyone was exulting over, whom everyone wanted to please; this pretty being, as fragile as her, the little old woman, and, like her too, toothless and hairless.

And she approached him, making pleasant faces, wanting to make him laugh.

But the terrified infant struggled under the caresses of the good decrepit woman and filled the house with his shrieking.

Then the good old woman withdrew into her eternal solitude, and she wept in a corner, saying to herself: — "Ah! for us, unhappy old females, the age of pleasing has passed, even the innocent; and we are a horror to the little children we want to love!"

III

THE ARTIST'S CONFIGEOR

How penetrating are autumn's final days! Ah! penetrating to the point of pain! for there are certain delicious sensations whose vagueness does not exclude intensity; and there is no sharper point than that of Infinity.

What a great delight to drown your gaze in the vastness of the sky and the sea! Solitude, silence, incomparable chastity of the blue! a small sail shivering on the horizon, which by its smallness and its isolation imitates my irremediable existence, monotonous melody of the swell, all those things think through me, or I think through them (for in the grandeur of reverie, the *ego* is quickly lost!); they *think*, I say, but musically and picturesquely, without quibbles, without syllogisms, without deductions.

However, those thoughts, whether they emerge from me or surge out of things, soon become too intense. The energy in voluptuousness creates a mal-aise and a positive suffering. My too taught nerves emit nothing but shrill and painful vibrations.

And now the depth of the sky dismays me; its limpidity exasperates me. The insensitivity of the sea, the immutability of the spectacle, it revolts me... Ah! is it necessary to suffer eternally, or to eternally flee the beautiful? Nature, merciless necromancer, eternally victorious rival, leave me be! Stop tempting my desires and my pride! The study of the beautiful is a duel wherein the artist cries out in fear of being vanquished.

IV

A MOME

It was the explosion of the New Year: chaos of mud and of snow, traversed by a thousand carriages, sparkling with trinkets and candies, teeming with cupidity and despair, the official delirium of a big city made to disturb the brain of the strongest recluse.

In the midst of this tohu-bohu and racket, a donkey trotted along briskly, harassed by a lout armed with a whip.

As the donkey was about to turn the corner of a sidewalk, a handsome gentleman, gloved, powdered, cruelly cravated and imprisoned in brand new clothes, bowed ceremoniously before the humble beast, and doffing his hat, said to him: "I wish you health and happiness!" then turned to I do not know which comrades with a fatuous air, as if to beg them to add their approval to his contentment.

The donkey did not see this beautiful mome, and continued to run with zeal wherever its duty called it.

As for me, I was suddenly seized by an immeasurable rage against this magnificent imbecile, who

to me contained within himself the whole spirit of
France.

V

THE DOUBLE ROOM

A room that resembles a reverie, a truly *spiritual* room, where the stagnant atmosphere is slightly tinged with pink and blue.

The soul takes a lazy bath, scented with regret and desire. — It's something crepuscular, bluish and rosy; a sensuous dream during an eclipse.

The furniture has elongated, prostrate, languid forms. It has the air of a dream; it seems to be endowed with a somnambulistic life, like the vegetal and the mineral. The fabrics speak a mute language, like flowers, like skies, like setting suns.

On the walls, no artistic abomination. Relative to the pure dream, the unanalyzed impression, a definite art, a positive art, is a blasphemy. Here, everything has sufficient clarity as well as the delicious indistinctness of harmony.

An infinitesimal fragrance of the most exquisite choice, mixed with a very slight humidity, swims in this atmosphere, where the somnolent spirit is lulled by the sensations of a greenhouse.

The muslin rains abundantly before the windows and before the bed; it cascades in snowy cataracts. On this bed lies the Idol, the Sovereign of Dreams. But why is she here? Who brought her? What magick power has instated her on this throne of reverie and of sensuousness? What does it matter? here she is! I recognize her.

Those are the eyes whose flame seers through the dusk; those subtle and terrible *peepers*, which I recognize by their frightening malice! They attract, they subjugate, they devour the gaze of the imprudent one who contemplates them. I have often studied them, those black stars that command curiosity and admiration.

To what benevolent demon do I owe it to be surrounded by mystery, silence, peace, and perfumes? O beatitude! what we generally call life, even in its happiest expansion, has nothing in common with this supreme life of which I am now aware and of which I savor minute by minute, second by second!

No! there are no more minutes, there are no more seconds! Time is gone; it is Eternity that reigns, an eternity of delights!

But a terrible, heavy knock sounds at the door, and, as in infernal dreams, it felt like I was being hit in the stomach with a pickaxe.

And then a Specter entered. It is a bailiff who comes to torture me in the name of the law; an infa-

mous concubine who comes to shriek of misery and add the trivialities of her life to the pains of mine; or the lackey of a newspaper director who requests the remainder of some manuscript.

The paradisiacal room, the idol, the Sovereign of Dreams, the *Sylphid*, as the great René said, all that magick disappeared with the brutal knock struck by the Specter.

Horror! I remember! I remember! Yes! this pigsty, this stay of eternal ennui, is mine own. Here are the stupid, dusty, chipped pieces of furniture; the hearth devoid of fire and of embers, soiled with sputum; the sad windows where the rain made furrows in the dust; manuscripts, crossed out or incomplete; the calendar where the pencil marked the sinister dates!

And this unearthly perfume, by which I was intoxicated with a perfected sensitivity, hélas! it is replaced by the fetid odor of tobacco mixed with I don't know what nauseating mold. We breathe here now the rot of desolation.

In this narrow world, but so full of disgust, only one known object smiles at me: the laudanum flask; an old and terrible friend; like all friends, hélas! fertile in caresses and treacheries.

Oh! yes! Time has reappeared; Time reigns supreme now; and with the hideous old man returned his entire demonic procession of Memories, Regrets,

Spasms, Fears, Anguishes, Nightmares, Wrath, and Neuroses.

I assure you that the seconds now are strongly and solemnly accented, and each one, springing from the pendulum, says: — "I am Life, unbearable, implacable Life!"

There is only one Second in human life whose mission is to announce good news, the *good news* that causes everyone an inexplicable fear.

Yes! Time reigns; it resumed its brutal dictatorship. And it pushes me, like I'm an ox, with its double stinger. — "So giddy up therefore! donkey! Sweat therefore, slave! Live therefore, damned one!"

VI

TO EACH HIS CHIMERA

Under a vast grey sky, on a vast dusty plain, without paths, without grass, without a thistle, without a nettle, I encountered several men who were walking as if hunched.

Each of them carried on his back an enormous Chimera, as heavy as a sack of flour or of coal, or the rucksack of a Roman infantryman.

But the monstrous beast was not an inert weight; on the contrary, it enveloped and oppressed each man with its supple and powerful muscles — with its two great claws it clasped the chest of each man's frame; and its remarkable head surmounted each man's forehead, like one of those horrible helmets that the ancient warriors hoped would make their enemies even more terrified.

I questioned one of those men, and I asked him where they were going. He replied that he knew nothing, neither he, nor the others; but obviously they were going somewhere, since they were driven by an invincible urge to walk.

Nota bene: none of those travelers looked troubled by the ferocious beast suspended from their necks and affixed to their backs; it looked as if each infantryman saw the beast as part of themselves. All those forlorn and serious faces betrayed no despair; under the splenetic dome of heaven, their feet plunged into the dust of a land as desolate as that heaven; they walked with the resigned physiognomy of those who are condemned to always hope.

And the procession passed by me and plunged into the atmosphere of the horizon, at the location where the rounded surface of the planet is hidden from the curiosity of the human gaze.

And for a few moments I persisted in wanting to fathom this mystery; but soon an irresistible Indifference descended upon me, and I was more heavily afflicted by it than they themselves were by their crushing Chimeras.

On Charles Méryon

It is not only seascapes that are lacking, a genre that is so poetic! (I do not take military dramas played out at sea for seascapes), but also a genre that I would gladly call the landscape of great cities, that is, the collection of grandeurs and beauties that result in a powerful agglomeration of men and of monuments, the deep and complicated charm of a city grown old and aged in the glories and tribulations of life.

A few years ago, a strong and unique man, a naval officer, is said to have begun a series of etchings of the most picturesque viewpoints of Paris. By the sharpness, the refinement, and the certainty of his drawing, Méryon recalls the excellent etchers of the past. I have rarely seen the natural solemnity of a great city represented with such poetic power. The majesty of accumulated stone, the bell towers *pointing with their fingers toward the heavens*, the obelisks of industry vomiting against the firmament their legions of smoke, the prodigious scaffolding encircling monuments under repair, pressing the ephemeral, paradoxical beauty of their architecture against the solid body of the architecture of monuments, the tumultuous sky, charged with anger and bitterness, the

depth of perspective heightened by the thought of all of the dramas contained therein — none of the complex elements that compose the painful and glorious decor of civilization have been forgotten. If Victor Hugo saw those excellent prints, he must have been pleased; he found, worthily represented, his

Mornful Isis, covered with a veil!
 Spider with a huge web,
 Where nations are taken!
 Fountain of obsessed urns!
 Breast constantly flooded,
 Where, to feed itself on the idea,
 Generations come!

.....

City that a storm envelops!

But a cruel demon touched Méryon's brain; a mysterious madness distorted those faculties which seemed as solid as they were brilliant. His nascent glory and his works were suddenly interrupted. And since then we are still anxiously awaiting consoling news from that unique naval officer, who had become in one day a powerful artist, and who had said good-bye to the solemn adventures of the Ocean to paint the black majesty of the most disturbing of cities.

I still regret, and I may be unwittingly obeying the addictions of my youth, the Romantic landscape,

even the Romantic landscape that already existed in the 18th century. Our landscape painters are far too herbivorous animals. They do not readily eat ruins, and, except for a small number of men such as Fromentin, the sky and the desert terrify them. I yearn for those great lakes that represent immobility in despair, the immense mountains, staircases from the planet to the sky, from where everything that seemed large appears small, the fortified castles (yes, my cynicism will go so far), the crenellated abbeys which are reflected in dreary ponds, the gigantic bridges, the Ninevite constructions, inhabited by vertigo, and finally, all that it would be necessary to invent, if all that did not exist!



Charles Méryon, *Le vampire* (1853)

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

With the surfeit of translations of *Paris Spleen*, why yet another? Is this book not superfluous? It is an audacious gesture in part, born of an obsession, if not a form of possession. If one is in any way devoted to the word, it is an Energy one cannot turn from, only toward, like the fatal turn of Orpheus toward Eurydice. Before speaking further of that, let me sound a few brief observations.

The existing translations of *Paris Spleen* are very good, if not often exemplary. Yet, some of the word choices of myriad translators have not been as precise or as accurate as some desire. Is that sufficient cause for tempting superfluity? If corresponding English words or phrases are not contemporaneous to the original work, they can jar, but not in a way intended by the writer. It is not a question of Marsyan dissonance, the logic of an inner or original discord, but of an anachronistic one — the work of an invasion, not a correspondence. In the end, it leads to something faintly misshapen. Such distortions, even when slight, take one out of the work, and so out of the world Baudelaire created. Tone is subtle, sometimes not; when it is off, the reverie evaporates. If we are

to enter Baudelaire's world, we want to remain there. To achieve that is partially a matter of time, that is, of being concordant with it. Nonetheless, some translators mistake what is current for what is modern, but the contemporary is distinct from the modern, and soon off pitch, hardly befitting an English equivalent of 19th century French prose.

Additionally, certain translations seem premised on the belief that books should be readily understandable. Consequently, allusions, just as direct references, to obscure or 'outdated' elements, are sometimes ignored, or worse, contemporized, made less foreign in an attempt to sound fresh, as if prose were produce. In opposition, and in honor of alienation & estrangement, I have elected to sustain Baudelaire's literary, mythic, and other references and allusions. This concerns objects as well. If the poet speaks of *gargoulettes* and not *cruches*, he quite specifically means a *gargoulette*, not a more common water jug, which can immediately evoke the image of a contemporary object alien to the world of the poem. Equally so, a *saltimbanque* is not merely a clown as some have it, and a *mirliton* is not merely a rustic pipe; the types are more precise. *Punchinello* is *Punchinello*. *Et cetera*. If we are going to read Baudelaire, let us read Baudelaire, in all his magnificent strangeness and particularity. Immediate digestibility is the work of consumerism, not poetry. Poetry is impossibility.

In nuce, there you have some of the thorns, minor or otherwise, that prodded this gamble. If it is not inordinately different, its subtleties are perchance distinct enough. A single new word can make a poem bristle with life. To commit this translation was for me an impassioned act, the song of a kind of delirium. With any luck, I was possessed enough to do it; if so, the spirit of Baudelaire is present herein. Is it outlandish to say I was thought *by Baudelaire*? Or is that my hallucination? A fever brought on by a pandemic climate, the infernal heat of the summer of 2020 and an excess of isolation, or, more concretely, simply far too many bottles of *the yellow* as *mon frère* Thibault Dorey, another writer and *bourlingueur*, calls *pastis*? And then the absinthe. In the poem "The Artist's *Confiteor*," Baudelaire speaks of an interpenetration of his body and what is seemingly external to it, of the things of the sky and the sea *thinking through him* ("because in the grandeur of reverie, the *ego* is quickly lost"), or of him *thinking through them*. Whether thought emerges from the self or whether it surges out of things themselves, Baudelaire leaves determinedly open. Rilke too speaks of the act of writing, of poetry, as a form of *visitation*, of the absence of a subjectum: "The poet is Orpheus, not the 'I' of the 'author.'" It is the arrival of the logos. The world is thinking within us, and when we translate, so — *we*



Photo of Charles Baudelaire by Félix Nadar (c. 1855)

COLOPHON



PARIS SPLEEN
was handset in InDesign CC.

The text typeface is *LT Palatino*
The display typeface is *PB Luminari*

Book design & typesetting: Alessandro Segalini

Cover image: Photo of Charles Baudelaire
by Félix Nadar (c. 1855)

Cover design: CMP

PARIS SPLEEN
is published by Contra Mundum Press.



Contra Mundum Press New York · London · Melbourne

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In the 1850s, ancien & Haussmannian Paris clash, giving birth to a violent disjunction. At that moment in time, *an other present* is born, a new history, like Baudelaire's poet freely abandoning his halo on the macadam. The laurel crown has been discarded; the pastoral poet is dead; classical lyric poetry is dead. The steam-driven, gaslit, electrically-charged poet is born. "Retreat Academic Muse!," Baudelaire commands, "I don't care about that old stutterer."

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Baudelaire's Paris is a place of experience, a metropolis that spawns unique and particular realities, a kaleidoscope of visions and mirror of alternative societies. The grist of his poems is not ancient Greece or the Renaissance. As he stated in the so-called preface to *Paris Spleen*, it is especially from frequenting great cities, from the crossroads of their innumerable relations, that the haunting ideal of the prose poem was born. Our flâneur wanders swiftly through crowds, in contact, but anonymous, extracting from the city material to forge his new *ars poetica*, like a bricolage artist.

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Contra Mundum Press

ISBN 978-1-940625-45-4



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CONTRAMUNDUMPRESS.COM

Translated by Rainer J. Hanshe

Contra Mundum also published Rainer J. Hanshe's translations of Baudelaire's *My Heart Laid Bare* (2017; 2020) and *Belgium Stripped Bare* (2019).