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BAUDELAIRE AND HUYSMANS:

A PARALLEL DEVELOPMENT

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By

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An examination of the lives of Baudelaire and Huysmans, showing how they both passed through the three stages of Dandy, Decadent and Satanist on the way to a final Spirituality.

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this dissertation is to indicate, in view of the autobiographical nature of their works, how the lives of Baudelaire and Huysmans conformed largely to the same pattern. Whereas that aspect of his works which described his spiritual pilgrimage has been obvious in the case of Huysmans, some examination of the Baudelaire criticism over the past hundred years may well prove useful to establish the links which bind together the works of the two men.

The Symbolist school of poets was the first body of criticism to give to the works of Baudelaire the credit which had been so stubbornly denied him in his lifetime, but what they looked for in Les Fleurs du Mal was rather a justification for their own revolt and source-material for their own efforts. Thus they selected those aspects of revolt and disgust with life, which, though they abound in his works, do not express the whole, coherent philosophy of the mature Baudelaire. Dr. Starkie writes of the Symbolists' appreciation of Baudelaire:

They admired in him chiefly the sensuous poet of rare sensations, who had wished, in his poetry, to emulate the evocative power of music. . . . But they appreciated most of all the poems of decay and horror, of the early years. They saw him chiefly as an aesthete and a dandy, a decadent, a man who blasphemed against accepted religion and morality, who smoked opium and hashish, who was alleged to dabble in Satanism, to attend Black Masses, and to practise all manner of vice and corruption. Des Esseintes, the hero of Huysmans'

novel, A Rebours, was typical of the Baudelairean character of the day, and he was copied by many writers and men of fashion. In the eighteen-eighties and nineties, Baudelaire's influence came to be identified with everything morbid, decadent and immoral, although this entailed the neglect of many aspects of his work.¹

The reaction against this view of Baudelaire was not long in coming. Barbey d'Aurevilly, followed later by Anatole France, was the first to distinguish the moralistic nature of Les Fleurs du Mal. Ernest Raynaud's book², published in 1922, the first edition of Dr. Starkie's Baudelaire, in 1933, to be followed by Marcel Ruff³, in 1955, showed the moral nature of Baudelaire's work, based on its fundamental dichotomy, the struggle between God and Satan, which derives directly from Christian theology. So much was this view of Baudelaire in the ascendant that Mario Praz⁴ suggested a return to the earlier view of Baudelaire, since the apologists for Catholicism had been so eager to claim Baudelaire as one of their number that, once again, the true perspective had been lost. In support of his thesis concerning the decay of Romanticism, becoming, with Baudelaire, Decadentism, Praz wrote in 1933:

¹E. Starkie, Baudelaire, (New York, New Directions, 1958), p. 16.

²E. Raynaud, Charles Baudelaire, (Paris, Garnier, 1922).

³M. Ruff, L'Esprit du mal dans l'esthétique baudelairienne, (Paris, Armand Colin, 1955).

⁴M. Praz, The Romantic Agony, trans. A. Davidson, (London, Faber and Faber, 1933).

At present there is a tendency to isolate all that is sanest and of most universal import in the poetry of Baudelaire. The "femmes damnées" are easily forgotten for the "petites vieilles", the black Venus for the golden-hearted servant girl and the dandy of ecclesiastical cut is on the way to being canonized as a saint...the Baudelaire of his own age was the satanic Baudelaire, who gathered into a strange bouquet the strangest orchids, the most monstrous aroids from among the wild tropical flora of French Romanticism.⁵

Using the notes which Baudelaire prepared for his lawyer's defence of Les Fleurs du Mal in 1857, and which have never been regarded as the true expression of Baudelaire's ideas on the book, Praz proceeds to re-erect the old accusations of decadence, death and decay which were levelled at the book by its first reviewers. However, such a view of Baudelaire seems, today, to be that held by a minority, whose literary myopia is exemplified in the final résumé by Praz of Baudelaire - a good instance of how to damn with faint praise:

Baudelaire merely sowed the seed of the tropical flora of fleshy, monstrous, putrescent plants which were destined to spring up in the hothouse of the "fin de siècle"; but of these "flowers of evil" there now remains among many withered orchids, nothing more than, here and there, a magnificent thorny rose - a rose of the kind that will always smell sweet.⁶

⁵Ibid. p. 143.

⁶Ibid. p. 151.

Any appreciation of Baudelaire's philosophy must be based on what has come to be known as the "architecture" of Les Fleurs du Mal, together with his critical writings, and most particularly the Journaux intimes in which he has provided us with the fullest account of himself which we possess. Barbey d'Aurevilly seems to have been among the first to discern the "architecture" or coherent thread in Les Fleurs du Mal. Reviewing the book for Le Pays on 24th July 1857, he wrote:

Les artistes qui voient les lignes sous le luxe et l'efflorescence de la couleur percevront très bien qu'il y a ici une architecture secrète, un plan calculé par le poète, méditatif et volontaire. Les Fleurs du Mal ne sont pas à la suite les unes des autres...elles sont moins des poésies qu'une oeuvre poétique de la plus forte unité. Au point de vue de l'art et de la sensation esthétique, elles perdraient donc beaucoup à n'être pas lues dans l'ordre où le poète, qui sait ce qu'il fait, les a rangées. Mais elles perdraient bien davantage au point de vue de l'effet moral.⁷

The fundamental struggle in the book is stated in the title of the first section "Spleen et Idéal", and the poet is continually harassed by the ugliness and futility of a world "où l'action n'est pas la soeur du rêve".⁸ After passing through the varying periods of hope and despair in which, like Pascal, he seeks "divertissements" such as wine, love,

⁷Cited by Starkie, Baudelaire, p. 569.

⁸Baudelaire, Ceuvres complètes (Paris, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1958), p. 191. All future references to the complete works of Baudelaire will be made to this edition, unless otherwise stated.

love of beauty, and, in a last desperate effort, looks for consolation in Satan, he reaches a kind of repose, relief from the towering "Ennui" which has taken a greater hold on him with his every failure, in the contemplation and acceptance of suffering and death. And, in L'Imprévu, one of his last poems, and one which many commentators believe would have been incorporated into the third edition of Les Fleurs du Mal, as the final solution to the poet's search for and reconciliation with God, he seems to have arrived at a solution to the despair which had dogged him for so long.

As to Huysmans, the novels from A Rebours onward clearly mark the stages in a development, from the pessimism of Schopenhauer and Naturalism of Zola, to conversion and beyond, where the aesthetically finicky soul of Huysmans sought repose in Oblature and in the beauty which he found in Church art and liturgy. In this study the novels chiefly under review will be A Rebours, in which Des Esseintes is the personification of the dandy-decadent - the first two stages in the development of Baudelaire and Huysmans - and so provides a synthesis, so to speak of those parts of their work; La-bas, where Durtal shares Baudelaire's attempt to find a solution in religion A Rebours; and finally En Route, in which Huysmans, by reason of his conversion, is spared the despair of pessimism.

⁹Ibid., p. 230.

The subtlest of the first reviewers of A Rebours, on its appearance in 1884, was Barbey d'Aurevilly. Remembering his own article on Les Fleurs du Mal, he went on to draw a parallel between the two books, and also, with singular perspicacity, to suggest the ultimate solution to the problem which Huysmans had posed himself. After quoting Des Esseintes' closing prayer, d'Aurevilly writes:

Est-ce assez humble et assez soumis?...C'est plus que la prière de Baudelaire:

Ah! Seigneur, donnez moi la force et le courage
De contempler mon coeur et mon corps sans dégoût!

Baudelaire, le satanique Baudelaire, qui mourut chrétien, doit être une des admirations de M. Huysmans. On sent sa présence, comme une chaleur, derrière les plus belles pages que M. Huysmans ait écrites. Eh bien, un jour, je défiai l'originalité de Baudelaire de recommencer Les Fleurs du Mal et de faire un pas de plus dans le sens épuisé du blasphème. Je serais bien capable de porter à l'auteur d' A Rebours le même défi: "Après Les Fleurs du Mal, dis-je, à Baudelaire, - il ne vous reste plus logiquement, que la bouche d'un pistolet ou les pieds de la croix. Mais l'auteur d'A Rebours les choisira-t-il?"¹⁰

To this remarkable insight, Huysmans was able to reply nineteen years later in his preface to the 1903 edition of A Rebours: "C'est Fait".¹¹

¹⁰J. Barbey d'Aurevilly, Le Roman Contemporain (Paris, Lemerre, 1902). The quotation from Baudelaire comes from "Un Voyage à Cythère" OE. comp., pp. 187-188.

¹¹Huysmans, A Rebours, Oeuvres complètes (Paris, Crès, 1928-34), VII, XXVIII.

But before his final conversion, Huysmans was to follow in the footsteps of Baudelaire. There is in *Des Esseintes*, Huysmans' evocation of the life which Baudelaire actually lived - the life of the dandy and the decadent poet. Just as these two early stages are common to the lives of both men, so each attempted, in Satanism, to resolve his difficulties, before entering finally upon a period of tranquillity. It is the purpose of this study to follow both authors through each of the four stages - dandy, decadent, satanist, spirituality - through which, I believe, each of them passed. In point of chronology and influence, the dandy was the first figure to interest the two men, and so it is to this interesting nineteenth century phenomenon that we turn in the first chapter.

Chapter 1

DANDY

1. The Dandyism of Baudelaire.

The first "stage" which both Baudelaire and Huysmans passed through on their spiritual pilgrimage was that in which an ardent admiration for the figure of the Dandy was useful to them in presenting a face to the world. In order to understand the role played by the dandy in the works of Baudelaire and Huysmans, it will first be necessary to replace the concept of dandyism in its historical and social context.

The eccentricity and extravagance both in behaviour and conversation which Baudelaire displayed throughout the two years, between 1842 and 1844, which he spent at the Hotel Lauzun are better understood if one remembers that a young poet in that bourgeois society felt impelled to distinguish himself from the rest of the herd. The age of the "July Monarchy" with its symbol of a rolled umbrella, was the crowning of the efforts of the bourgeois class to introduce a dull respectability with the resultant artistic vacuum, into a country, which, since 1789, had had little time for such a prosaic pursuit. The great generation of Romantic poets reacted against the new dullness of life, but only in their works. The second-class poets of whom Petrus Borel was the acknowledged leader between 1830 and 1835, being less talented, reacted against it by their behaviour. Dr. Starkie describes the period 1830-1840 thus:

The reign of Louis-Philippe was one of the most prosaic periods in French history, a time when material values, generally speaking, alone prevailed and there were immense prizes for those who could gain the ears of the new and powerful middle-class. There were some, however, who considered that this bid for popularity could only result in the adulteration of the pure standards of good taste. They, for their part, took a pride in their lack of popularity...The leader of this exclusive group of poets of the eighteen-thirties was Petrus Borel who styled himself the Lycanthrope, that is the man-wolf.¹

The group of poets who called themselves Bouzingos, in whose number were to be found at one time or another in the eighteen-thirties, O'Neddy, Gautier, Nerval, and Jehan du Seigneur as well as Borel, their leader, used both elements of dandyism, elegance and eccentricity to "épater le bourgeois". The first and most striking concern of the dandy was his wish for elegance, the desire to strut like a peacock, thus proclaiming his contempt for middle-class conventions and appearances. Helen Trudgian sees in this desire to shock, an expression of one of the most basic of Man's urges:

Notons, en passant, combien cette fureur de se distinguer par le costume traduit la protestation implicite d'une élite contre les temps démocratiques. C'est un recul volontaire dans un passé quelconque, une affirmation d'aristocratie poussée, à l'occasion, jusqu'à l'extravagance. C'est une manière d'être, une sorte de philosophie. L'homme s'astreint à exprimer sa propre personnalité par le vêtement.²

¹E. Starkie, Petrus Borel, the Lycanthrope (London, Faber and Faber 1954), pp. 14-15.

²H. Trudgian, L'Esthétique de J.-K. Huysmans (Paris, Conard, 1934). p. 212.

Baudelaire's concern with elegance of attire becomes much more comprehensible when one remembers the poets who attended the "première" of Hernani in 1830, wearing every kind of extravagant garment. The "Jeune France" who supported Hugo were eager to show their distaste for the solid citizens whom they considered incapable of sharing their enthusiasm for the new poetry. The most celebrated member of the "Jeune France" was, of course, Théophile Gautier, who, clad in his scarlet doublet, was among the most enthusiastic at the 1830 performance. Dr. Starkie tells us that: "In the eighteen-thirties, Gautier's usual dress was a frock-coat trimmed with black brandenburgs"³; and Tabarant describes him as he appeared at the "Salon" of 1840 in these terms:

Voici l'immense feutre sur la longue chevelure emmêlée, le crasseux velours violet d'une redingote ouatée ouvrant sur un col où se noue de travers une cravate, tout le débraillé du jeune auteur de Mademoiselle de Maupin. M. Théophile Gautier.⁴

Nor is he alone, as Dr. Starkie points out:

Jehan du Seigneur always wore a black velvet tunic, with a taffeta tie, while Barbey d'Aurevilly's normal dress was a tight-fitting coat with wide pleated basques, opening on to a green silk waistcoat and a goffered lace jabot, and with these he wore skin-tight trousers of a white material with a pale blue stripe running down the side seams. The crowning touch was a wide-brimmed black hat lined underneath with crimson velvet.⁵

³E. Starkie, Baudelaire, p. 82

⁴A. Tabarant, La Vie artistique au temps de Baudelaire (Paris, Mercure de France, 1942), p. 20

⁵E. Starkie, op. cit., p. 82

Already in these descriptions, it can be seen how mere elegance was quickly discarded in favour of eccentricity which, in its constant desire to shock by going against the accepted norms of society, would lead to the extreme position adopted by decadent authors. Borel again was among those who gave free rein to their desire to be exceptional, and his extravagant conversation reminds one of Baudelaire's wild flights of imagination when discussing his "voyage" to the Indies. Mario Praz writes: "Certainly Petrus Borel, the "lycanthrope" who flaunted a waistcoat "à la Robespierre and an ogre's beard, and missed no opportunity of displaying his superb feline teeth, was a dandy in the style of the Terror, a fumiste".⁶

Such extravagance paved the way for the attitudes struck by Baudelaire and for the literary posturings of Des Esseintes. But examples are legion: Théophile Dondey, another protagonist of Hugo in 1830, disgusted by the conventional nature of his name changed it by anagram to Philothée O'Neddy and "used to claim that he was obliged to keep his glasses on at night, as he was so short-sighted that otherwise, he would not be able to see his dreams".⁷

A final example will suffice, if not to explain fully, at least to throw a little more light on Baudelaire's early extravagances. Gérard de Nerval's wish to shock the dull bourgeois out of their complacency was such that he far outdid even Des Esseintes, in behaviour at least.

⁶Praz, op. cit., p. 131

⁷Starkie, op. cit., p. 82

Comparing Baudelaire and Nerval, Dr. Starkie writes:

Baudelaire never equalled Gerard de Nerval in eccentricity, who used to go on a visit to his friends, taking with him a large Renaissance bed, and then used to sleep on the floor beside it, out of respect for it. He used to bring a skull to parties with him as a drinking mug, claiming it was that of his father killed in the retreat from Russia, and he was also reputed to have gone walking in a public park in Paris leading a live lobster on a pale blue leash.⁸

Thus when Barbey d'Aurevilly and Baudelaire made of dandyism a "religion", it is in the context of poets' behaviour in the eighteenth-thirties that one should judge them.

Barbey d'Aurevilly was the first to make of the cult of elegance and eccentricity a "religion" of dandyism. His article, "Du Dandysme et de Georges Brummel", which appeared in 1845, became the "breviary" of the dandy. But he is concerned still only with externals such as dress and behaviour. Baudelaire was the first to see the spiritual potentialities of such a figure. Barbey gives his view of dandyism in these terms:

Son caractère le plus général est de produire toujours l'imprévu, ce à quoi l'esprit accoutumé au joug des règles ne peut pas s'attendre en bon logique...Le dandysme... se

⁸ Ibid.

joue de la règle et pourtant la respecte encore. Il en souffre et s'en venge tout en la subissant; il s'en réclame quand il y échappe; il la domine et en est dominé tour à tour, double et muable caractère.⁹

But with d'Aurevilly, the dandy is already giving way to the decadent. He traces, in his article, the beginnings of dandyism in modern Europe, to the period of the Restoration in England, a period of license, a protest against the harsh, Puritan rule of Cromwell and his Major-Generals. As a result of over-indulgence the dandy becomes subject to boredom, the product of a civilization where surfeit of luxury has jaded the palate, and where remaining energies are used in the search for new sensations, for "des péchés neufs", as Huysmans was later to write¹⁰. Barbey sees the dandy as: "... le produit d'une société qui s'ennuie, et s'ennuyer ne rend pas bon".¹¹ He also finds in dandyism the characteristic which will become one of the chief subjects treated by decadent writers, artificiality, used as a means of acquiring new sensations. A. E. Carter writes of the nineteenth-century dandy-decadent figure: "He seeks to astonish the vulgar, but he has no passions: they would destroy his balance; a true dandy must remain cold. Dandyism is another form of artificiality, a flower that grows in the hothouses of an advanced civilization".¹² Carter goes on to quote Barbey on the subject of leisure

⁹Cited by P. Cogny, J.-K. Huysmans à la recherche de l'unité (Paris, Nizet, 1953), p. 79.

¹⁰Huysmans, Certains, CE. comp., X, 103.

¹¹See Cogny, op. cit., p. 79

¹²A. E. Carter, The Idea of Decadence in French Literature (1830-1900) (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1958), p. 45.

and artificiality which were to be found in "ces salons où la richesse, le loisir, le dernier degré de civilisation produisent des affectations charmantes qui ont remplacé le naturel".¹³ But before the dandy finally yielded his place to the decadent in literature, Baudelaire was to give us the fullest description of his position, a position which Huysmans was later to adopt when he conceived *Des Esseintes*.

Baudelaire was quick to see the latent possibilities in the paste-board figure of the dandy and to endow him with a psychology, largely stoical in nature, which satisfied his own deep demands on life. His portrait of the dandy derives largely from the stage of his personal development in his youth which he knew during the years which he spent at the Hotel Lauzun, and the autobiographical traits which he incorporated into the dandy form the subject matter of this first chapter. The same will be true of the relationship between Huysmans and A Reboours.

In 1842 Baudelaire, at the age of 21, came into possession of a considerable sum of money. After two desultory changes of address, he moved into the Hôtel Rimodan, which was also called the Hôtel Lauzun after one of its erstwhile illustrious occupants. The two years between 1842 and the establishment by his family of a "conseil judiciaire" on September 21, 1844, were the happiest years of his life. It was in these years spent at the Hotel Lauzun that he was able to live to the full the role of dandy which he had in part already conceived and to which he would refer continually in his Journaux intimes. The keynote of Baudelaire's

¹³Ibid., p. 46

dandyism was his extreme fastidiousness, wedded to his desire for complete individuality. The combination of Baudelaire's will to distinguish himself from the herd, together with his undoubted taste in matters aesthetic, must do much to remove the charge of frivolity which has been laid against his conduct during these years. Baudelaire was serious in his dandyism, and we are thus justified in seeing it as a stage in his spiritual development, for as Raynaud remarks:

Il ne faut pas voir dans le dandysme de Baudelaire une conception frivole; l'unique souci d'occuper, coûte que coûte, la galerie et de régenter la mode; un futile essai de singularité. C'est tout autre chose. Être dandy a son sens, c'est "aspirer au sublime".¹⁴

Before turning to the more strictly "spiritual" aspects of Baudelaire's cult of elegance and eccentricity, it would be as well, perhaps, to review the physical manifestations of his individuality which became apparent during the time he stayed on the Ile Saint-Louis, "séjour élu des princes de la bohème".¹⁵

His first care was, of course, for elegance of attire. Here the most celebrated description comes to us from Nadar, who knew Baudelaire intimately at the time. The first time Nadar met Baudelaire, the poet

¹⁴E. Raynaud, Baudelaire et la religion du dandysme (Paris, Mercure de France, 1918), p. 19

¹⁵Raynaud, Ch. Baudelaire, p. 148

was wearing:

... un habit noir, tres évasé du torse, d'où la tête de Baudelaire sortait comme une fleur sort d'un cornet, et à basques infinitésimales (on les portait alors très larges), amenuisées en sifflet. Baudelaire se prévalait, ce jour-là, d'un pantalon noir sanglé par le sous-pied, de bottes irréprochablement vernies, d'un col de chemise et de manchettes de linge blanc, sans empois, aux apparences de mousseline, et d'une cravate rouge-sang-de-boeuf. Il était ganté de rose pale.¹⁶

Another intimate at that time, Gustave Le Vavas seur, tells us that he wore: "... un chapeau haut de forme, habit noir aux manches larges, cravate noire au noeud sans raideur, pantalon de casimir noir, souliers lacés ou escarpins bas, noirs en hiver, blancs en été: "Byron habillé par Brummel"."¹⁷.

His rooms at the Hôtel Lauzun had to be worthy of a man of high fashion, and already in some of the details we are reminded of the refuge built by Des Esseintes at Fontenay-aux-Roses. This is the description given by Dr. Starkie and culled largely from Nadar and Manville of Baudelaire's apartments in the Hotel Lauzun:

He papered his rooms in the broadest of black and red stripes... There were large comfortable chairs and low divans and the lights were dim and shaded...No books were to be seen, and when guests remarked on this with astonishment, Baudelaire, with a smile of pleasure at having surprised his friends, used to slide back the panels in one room and point to rows of rare

¹⁶Ibid., p. 154

¹⁷See Tabarant, op. cit., p. 64

volumes within. He only possessed about thirty or forty books in those days, but all were valuable and well-chosen old French poets, Latin poets of the late period, poets of the Renaissance - all bound in leather, tooled by hand and ornamented with gold sixteenth-century bindings...There were soft, thick rugs everywhere to deaden the sound of footsteps, and a silent manservant appeared at intervals to bring food and drink...and Baudelaire himself would move noiselessly amongst his guests, sprinkling Eastern perfumes.¹⁸

But Baudelaire's boredom with elegance was to lead to the desire for the bizarre, the wish to shock by deliberately cultivated eccentricity. An example quoted by Tabarant shows eccentricity still tightly bound to elegance, and indeed, arising from it:

Un moment - un bref moment de 1840-il affecta d'aller nu-tête dans Paris, et son condisciple Mignard, du collège de Lyon l'y rencontra, "toujours beau, charmant, distingué, un juste corps de velours serré à la taille", mais sans chapeau: "Il m'expliqua que c'était non seulement une habitude, mais un parti-pris. Si loin qu'il fut de sa demeure, il aimait d'y passer pour un habitant du quartier."¹⁹

Baudelaire's conversation at this time, in which monstrous and perverted sexual activity figured very largely, was a fruitful source of anecdote, and indeed, almost replaced criticism of his works in the late nineteenth century. In his desire to shock his listeners, he would tell

¹⁸ Starkie, op. cit., pp. 75-76.

¹⁹ See Tabarant, op. cit., p. 28

the most fantastic tales of his love-affairs, such as the one used by Madame de Molènes to show the perverse nature of his affections:

Ses amours eurent souvent pour objet des femmes-phénomènes; il passait de la naine à la géante...L'une des géantes avait sept pieds et demi; l'une des naines, soixante-douze centimètres seulement. On ne peut pas tout avoir en ce monde! murmurait-il alors philosophiquement.²⁰

Raynaud has collected a few of his extravagances in conversation into a striking "bouquet" of eccentricity: "Quand j'avais la gale...-Moi qui suis fils de prêtre!...-Le jour où j'ai jeté ma maîtresse par la fenêtre. ...-Ne trouvez-vous pas que la cervelle de petit enfant a comme un arrière goût de noisette".²¹

It is from these and other examples of his eccentricity that his contemporaries formed their view of Baudelaire, the sadist, the decadent and Satanist, a view which blinded them to other and more lasting aspects of his work.

Baudelaire's definition of the dandy leaves us in no doubt as to the spiritual nature of his "vocation". After refuting the idea that a dandy is merely a tailor's dummy, he goes on to define dandyism:

C'est avant tout le besoin ardent de se faire une originalité, contenu dans les limites extérieures des convenances. C'est une espèce de culte de soi-même qui peut survivre à la recherche du bonheur...C'est le plaisir d'étonner et la satisfaction orgueilleuse de ne jamais être étonné.²²

²⁰ See W.T. Bandy and Claude Pichois, eds. Baudelaire devant ses contemporains (Monaco, Editions du Rocher, 1957), pp. 257-258.

²¹ Raynaud, Baudelaire et la religion du dandysme, op. cit., p. 32

²² Baudelaire, O.E. Comp., p. 907.

However frivolous this last wish may appear, Baudelaire goes on to speak of the "religion" of dandyism which is a form of stoic monasticism whose aspirants are forbidden any show of emotion. It is with this attitude in mind that he defines the type of beauty most pleasing to the dandy:

Le caractère de beauté du dandy consiste surtout dans l'air froid qui vient de l'inébranlable résolution de ne pas être ému; on dirait un feu latent qui se fait deviner, qui pourrait mais qui ne veut pas rayonner. C'est ce qui est, dans ces images, parfaitement exprimé.²³

His favourite literary figure is the Miltonic Satan, a character whose aristocratic mien and incurable taste for the perverse evokes the cry, "le plus beau type de beauté virile est Satan - à la manière de Milton".²⁴ One thinks also of the poem "Don Juan aux enfers" where the silent contempt of the figure leaning on his sword in the boat which is bearing him to Hell, becomes the dandy figure "par excellence" in the writings of Baudelaire:

Mais le calme héros, courbé sur sa rapière,
Regardait le sillage et ne daignait rien voir.²⁵

Woman is categorized by the dandy as unworthy and degrading because her charms are "natural" and not cultivated like those of the dandy. Another reason for this attitude lies in his ever-growing

²³ Ibid., p. 909

²⁴ Baudelaire, "Fusées", Journaux intimes, OE. comp., p. 1196.

²⁵ Les Fleurs du Mal, OE. comp., p. 95

obsession with original sin, which made him see the evil in nature and in "natural" man. Thus, when he criticizes woman in Mon Coeur mis à nu, the cause is spiritual: "La femme est naturelle, c'est-à-dire abominable. Aussi est-elle toujours vulgaire, c'est-à-dire le contraire du dandy".²⁶

Dandyism has become, then, for Baudelaire a means of escaping the "damnation", the sense of guilt which haunted him, the influence of which can be seen in such poems as "L'Horloge", "L'Irréparable", "L'Irrémédiable", etc. As he wrote later in Mon Coeur mis à nu. "Etre un grand homme et un saint pour soi-même, voilà l'unique chose importante".²⁷

In the spiritual pilgrimage of Baudelaire, the figure of the dandy and the poet's interest therein, forms the first step. From the first, adolescent care for the mere externals of dress, etc., Baudelaire develops the dandy into a spiritual being, something of a stoic. The principal idea of the dandy - to distinguish himself from the rest of men by his dress, is being transformed by Baudelaire into a figure whose distinguishing marks would be spiritual. Later in Baudelaire's life the dandy's stoicism became an aspiration towards saintliness, the pleasures of which were more lasting than the other "divertissements" offered by the world. Baudelaire has passed through the first stage of the journey which will lead to "L'Imprévu".

²⁶Baudelaire, O.E. comp., p. 1207

²⁷Baudelaire, O.E. comp., p. 1222

ii. Dandyism in A Rebours

Before turning to the aspects of dandyism to be found in A Rebours, and the Baudelairean influence therein, let us consider for a moment another nineteenth century dandy, whose place in that novel is unquestioned. The Comte Robert de Montesquiou-Fezensac cut a distinguished, if slightly ludicrous figure in the eighteen-eighties, and Robert Baldick describes his elegance and eccentricity in these terms: "It was widely known that he suited his clothes not only to the occasion, the season, and the weather, but also to the tastes and temperament of his host; and it was rumoured that sometimes, in lieu of a cravat, he would wear a bunch of Parma violets tucked into a low-necked shirt".²⁸ This last trait was borrowed directly by Huysmans for his creation of Des Esseintes.²⁹ But it is chiefly for the details of the furnishings of Montesquiou's rooms in the Rue Franklin, which he used in A Rebours, that Huysmans had cause to be grateful to the dandy-Count. The details for the "refined Thebaid" he received from Mallarmé who was invited to visit Montesquiou in 1883. Montesquiou himself, regretting this invitation, since, through A Rebours his tastes were to become notorious, wrote in his autobiography, Les Pas effacés:

Mallarmé, qui ne pouvait que ressentir, avec une très vive intensité, la représentation oculaire en présence de laquelle je le plaçais à l'improviste...sortit de chez moi dans un

²⁸R. Baldick, The Life of J.-K. Huysmans (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1959). p. 80.

²⁹Huysmans, A Rebours, OE. comp., VII, 18.

état d'exaltation froide...Ce fut donc de très admirative, très sympathique, et très sincère bonne foi, je n'en doute pas, qu'il fit de la chose, à Huysmans, un récit indistinct et sommaire.³⁰

However accurate or otherwise may be Montesquiou's appraisal of Mallarmé's reaction, there is no doubt that Huysmans used the poet's account in A Rebours. Another evaluation of the debt Huysmans owed to Montesquiou is provided by Helen Trudgian, who wrote:

Or, on trouve dans A Rebours non seulement de semblables singularités dans le décor, mais la quête d'une illusion assez analogue. Le dandy, lui aussi, se façonne une cellule monastique. Il fait en sorte que sa salle à manger soit semblable à la cabine d'un yacht. A l'exemple aussi du comte, il fait placer un aquarium dans le retrait d'une fenêtre... des livres tirés à peu d'exemplaires ou richement et curieusement imprimés et reliés; cette tortue comme celle du baron qui avait la cuirasse dorée et incrustée de pierres rares.³¹

As to the accusation levelled against Huysmans that Des Esseintes was a deliberate caricature of Montesquiou, one has only to read A Rebours and then place it in the context of Huysmans' other novels to see how much Des Esseintes owes to his creator. The dandyism of Des Esseintes derives in part from Huysmans' aspiration towards a

³⁰Cited by H. Brunner and J.C. de Coninck, En Marges d' "A Rebours" (Paris, Borbonainé, 1929), p. 111.

³¹H. Trudgian, op. cit., p. 215. (It is interesting to note that the jewelled tortoise has enjoyed some measure of literary popularity. Thus we find in Evelyn Waugh's Brideshead Revisited the following description of Julia Flyte's Christmas present: "It was a small tortoise with Julia's initials set in diamonds in the living shell, and this slightly obscene object..became a memorable part of the evening". Brideshead Revisited, (Boston, Little, Brown and Co., 1946), p. 164.)

world of wealth and ease, such as he was never fortunate enough to enjoy in his lifetime. The "relationship" between Des Esseintes and Montesquiou has been well defined by Brunner and Coninck:

Des Esseintes n'a de commun avec l'auteur des Pas effacés que le désir de se singulariser, d'apporter dans une vie qu'ils veulent moins banale plus de fantaisie ou d'imprévu, de recourir à l'écœntricit   pour tenter de bannir un moment l'ennui ou pour afficher une sup  riorit   personnelle.³²

Huysmans' work as a Naturalist writer, which began in 1876 with Marthe, histoire d'une fille, culminated in A Vau l'eau (1882), with its account of M. Folantin's hideous dilemma. Unable to find either a restaurant able to cater to his over-sensitive digestive system, or satisfaction for his sexual appetites in squalid episodes with prostitutes (marriage being barred by him as a result of his misogyny), Folantin, at the end of A Vau l'eau, decides to let himself drift "with the stream", that is, to pursue indifference as the only remedy against despair. A possible alternative to this bleak existence is suggested, but Folantin is too indifferent to try it; this is of considerable interest in view of the future development of Huysmans - of whom Folantin is a caricature. In desperation Folantin cries: "La religion seule pourrait panser la plaie qui me tire".³³

³²H. Brunner and J. C. de Coninck, op. cit., p. 58.

³³Huysmans, A Vau l'eau, OE. comp., V. 78.

Huysmans' own position was similar to this. As well as being in the same difficulty regarding food and the "crise juponnière", as Folantin, he had become increasingly dissatisfied with the aesthetic of Naturalism. As he tells us in the important preface to the 1903 edition of A Rebours: "Au moment où parut A Rebours, c'est-à-dire en 1884, la situation était donc celle-ci: le naturalisme s'essoufflait à tourner la meule dans le même cercle."³⁴ And earlier in the same preface he had written:

On était alors en plein naturalisme; mais cette école, qui devait rendre l'inoubliable service de situer des personnages réels dans des milieux exacts, était condamnée à se rabâcher, en piétinant sur place. Elle n'admettait guère, en théorie du moins, l'exception.³⁵

But Huysmans, by 1883 at the latest was seeking the solution to his dilemma outside Naturalism, which refused him the use of the exceptional. His passion for Baudelaire had given him one of the chief characteristics of the dandy, as Pierre Cogny notes: "Ce qui domine, avant tout, en ce Huysmans de 1884, c'est le besoin incessant et irrésistible d'étonner. Il s'agissait d'abord d'échapper au 'cul de sac naturaliste'."³⁶ Cogny adds that it is precisely the dandy, as conceived by Barbey d'Aurevilly and Baudelaire, which attracted Huysmans and thus influenced him to write A Rebours:

³⁴Huysmans, A Rebours, OE, comp., VII, X.

³⁵Ibid., p. VII.

³⁶Cogny, J.-K. Huysmans, p. 78.

Il est porté vers Baudelaire et, par lui, vers le dandysme, qu'il faut considérer, avec l'auteur des Paradis artificiels, comme une religion véritable, donc comme un moyen parmi d'autres de sortir de l'impasse (du naturalisme)...Admirateur avoué de Barbey d'Aurevilly et de Baudelaire, Huysmans ne pouvait pas ne pas être séduit par cette forme nouvelle de la pensée. Il était sûr, en tous cas, en l'adoptant et en l'érigeant en principe, d'obtenir un succès de surprise.³⁷

The truth, then, is that he saw dandyism as a way out of his dilemma and he used his admiration for Baudelaire to escape from Naturalism. His enthusiasm for Baudelaire had already been expressed in a preface which he had written for Théodore Hannon's Rimes de Joie, which appeared in 1881. He congratulated Hannon on taking his inspiration from Baudelaire, of whom he wrote:

J'ai nommé le poète de génie qui, de même que notre grand Flaubert, ouvre sur un épithète, des horizons sans fin, l'abstracteur de l'essence et du subtil de nos corruptions... j'ai nommé le prodigieux artiste qui a gerbé Les Fleurs du Mal. Charles Baudelaire.³⁸

In Des Esseintes is manifested each predilection of the Baudelairean dandy: desire for elegance of dress, the wish to "épater le bourgeois" by his eccentricity and the feeling of belonging to an élite "Anywhere out of the World".³⁹ In A Rebours, the desire to appear

³⁷ Ibid., p. 79

³⁸ Cited by Pierre Dufay, "Une Source ignorée d'A Rebours: La Fanfarlo". Mercure de France, CCLIV (1934), 52-53.

³⁹ Baudelaire, Le Spleen de Paris, OE. comp., pp. 355-356.

eccentric appears before the desire for elegance. It is only after the celebrated "sermon" to his assembled tradesmen that Des Esseintes feels the need to add to his eccentric reputation by his dress. The "sermon" must be quoted as an example of eccentricity at its apogee:

Enfin il avait fait préparer une haute salle destinée à la réception de ses fournisseurs; ils entraient, s'asseyaient les uns à côté des autres, dans des stalles d'église et alors il montait dans une chaire magistrale et prêchait le sermon sur le dandysme, adjurant ses bottiers et ses tailleurs de se conformer, de la façon la plus absolue, à ses brefs en matière de coupe, les menaçant d'une excommunication pécuniaire s'ils ne suivaient pas, à la lettre, les instructions contenues dans ses monitoires et ses bulles.⁴⁰

Having acquired the reputation of an eccentric, not surprisingly, he begins to dress in "costumes de velours blanc", in "gilets d'orfroi, en plantant, en guise de cravate, un bouquet de Parme dans l'échancrure décolletée d'une chemise".⁴¹ As we have already seen, he has borrowed the last trait directly from Montesquiou. There follows the description of the "repas de deuil" given for men of letters by Des Esseintes, for which, appropriately enough, everything must be black. Eccentricity topples over here into the plainly ludicrous:

Dans la salle à manger tendue de noire, ouverte sur le jardin de sa maison subitement transformé, montrant ses allées poudrées

⁴⁰ Huysmans, A Rebours, CE. comp., VII, 18.

⁴¹ Ibid.

de charbon, son petit bassin maintenant bordé d'une margelle de basalte et rempli d'encre...le dîner avait été apporté sur une nappe noire, garnie de corbeilles...éclairée par des candélabres où brûlaient des flammes vertes...Tandis qu'un orchestre dissimulé jouait des marches funèbres, les convives avaient été servis par des négresses nues, avec des mules et des os en toile d'argent, semée de larmes.⁴²

And so it goes on, eccentricity piled on eccentricity for the sake of effect. Similarly one feels that Des Esseintes' taste in literature, art and music, notwithstanding the fact that the opinions which he expressed on Verlaine, Mallarmé and Tristan Corbière were of great help to those poets in gaining recognition for their efforts, springs largely from the desire to belong to an intellectual elite. This seems particularly so in Des Esseintes' enthusiasm for Wagner. Following once again in Baudelaire's footsteps, he declares his espousal of the cause of the great German composer, and one feels that Miss Trudgian has seen the motive for this enthusiasm when she writes: "A Paris, les opéras de Wagner faisaient l'objet de violentes protestations, mais une élite persistait à la suite de Charles Baudelaire, à défendre cette musique dramatique."⁴³

In short, Huysmans' dandyism as expressed in A Rebours possesses all the characteristics of that of Baudelaire, and thus the view that both men used that nineteenth-century phenomenon seems particularly tenable. Huysmans also saw in dandyism a means to escape from Naturalism,

⁴² Ibid., pp. 18-19.

⁴³ Trudgian, op. cit., p. 231.

and this first step on the path which will lead to conversion is described by Huysmans in the preface to A Rebours. He describes the step which he has taken between the despair of Folantin and the dandyism of Des Esseintes, thus:

Je me figurais un monsieur Folantin, plus lettré, plus raffiné, plus riche et qui a découvert, dans l'artifice, un dérivatif au dégoût que lui inspirent les tracas de la vie et les mœurs américaines de son temps; je le profilais fuyant à tire-d'aile dans le rêve, se réfugiant dans l'illusion d'extravagantes féeries, vivant, seul, loin de son siècle, dans le souvenir évoqué d'époques plus cordiales, de milieux moins vils.⁴⁴

It is precisely this flight in the face of the ugly reality of the nineteenth century which will deepen the rather puerile ideas of the dandy to embrace the more perverse, but more far-reaching concepts of the decadent. In this again, Huysmans will follow Baudelaire's lead, will see in the poet a source for his own attempts at escape. Brunner and Coninck summarize briefly the influence of Baudelaire on Huysmans:

Huysmans avait une prédilection pour Baudelaire; comme lui il était pessimiste, souffrant et s'exaspérant comme lui de toutes les laideurs d'un monde qui avait déçu sa jeunesse et ses aspirations d'artiste; les Fleurs du Mal et les Petits Poèmes en prose étaient des oeuvres qu'il relisait souvent, quoi d'étonnant

⁴⁴ A Rebours, OE. comp., VII, XI.

alors qu'en écrivant A Rebours, mettant en scène un personnage abominablement lassé de tout, il lui ait prêté des pensées qui seraient les siennes ou celles de Baudelaire et qui chemineraient sur les mêmes voies en de certaines occasions.⁴⁵

Dandyism thus served its turn for both our authors, but this religion of elegance for its own sake, though it was sufficient to fill the empty heads of Brummel and his disciples, had not the depth to hold for long such men as Baudelaire or Huysmans. After dandyism they were ready for the next step, and as Benjamin Fondane notes, the distance between the stoically monastic dandyism of Baudelaire and his desire for saintliness is not very great:

Il n'y a pas, pour Baudelaire, de différence tranchée entre le dandy et le saint; il en fait l'homme qui aspire sans interruption au sublime, qui doit vivre, et mourir devant un miroir; il veut indifféremment être un dandy ou un saint, son "credo philosophique" se résume en ces termes: "self-purification and antihumanity". Le dandy n'est pas celui qui passe ses vêtements au verre, c'est l'homme qui passe son moi au verre, qui s'efforce de tuer en lui son vouloir vivre.⁴⁶

Huysmans, too, strongly influenced by Baudelaire as he was, was able as a result, to see as a whole the progress made by the poet during his lifetime, and it might be tenable to see him consciously following in the footsteps of Baudelaire. For, like Baudelaire before him, Huysmans, tired of the "corsets" of the dandy, chose as the next step to examine the "doctrines" of decadence - and this second stage in the development of the two men forms the theme of our second chapter.

⁴⁵ En Marge d' "A Rebours", op. cit., pp. 35-36.

⁴⁶ B. Fondane, Baudelaire et l'expérience du gouffre. Cited by Cogny, op. cit., p. 83.

Chapter II

DECADENT

i. Decadent influences on Baudelaire

A. E. Carter sees as the chief characteristics of the decadent movement the revolt against the Rousseau conception of the "noble savage", and an accompanying disillusionment on the part of poets with regard to the cult of idealized love as sung by the Romantics. Once the belief in a beneficent and beautiful nature had been uprooted, and with it, of course, all expression of what has been aptly named the "pathetic fallacy", the way was paved for the introduction of artificiality, leading to pessimism and thence to the depiction of depravity and perversion. Baudelaire's work used to the full the decadent themes prevalent in his day, and indeed, sought in decadence a solution to his own profound world-weariness. Huysmans, in writing A Rebours, provided what Arthur Symons called at the time, "the breviary of the decadence"¹. The place which the cult of the artificial occupied in the writings of decadent authors is well summarized by Carter in these terms:

Artificiality, in fact, is the chief characteristic of decadence as the nineteenth century understood the word. By a voluntary contradiction of the nature-cult, writers were able to see all the traditional Romantic themes in a new light and a new

¹Cited by R. Baldick, op. cit., p. 78

and broader perspective. Their whole approach, of course, was entirely deliberate: from Gautier to Mirbeau, everybody who took up a pen realized that he was going "against the grain".²

And of the conditions which produced such ideas, he writes: "Decadent sensibility develops from the theory that civilization is artificial and corrupt; it dwells orchid-like in the hothouses of an excessive and aging culture, in the boudoirs and brothels of the great city".³

Among the precursors of the decadents, as noted by Carter and, more particularly, by Mario Praz, we find such widely differing talents as Byron, Choderlos de Laclos, Sade and Gautier. Praz sees in Byron's seeming inability to take pleasure from anything but vice a forerunner of Baudelaire and Des Esseintes:

It was in transgression that Byron found his own life-rhythm...It suffices here to sum up the case again - the subject is a very trite one...-by saying that Byron sought in incest a spice for love ("great is their love who love in sin and fear": Manfred, line 67), and that he required the feeling of guilt to arouse in him the phenomenon of the moral sense, and the feeling of fatality in order to appreciate the flow of life.⁴

Praz goes on to speak of Byron's undoubted sadistic treatment of his wife, and, to support his view that the English poet was a precursor of Baudelaire, he quotes the line: "I loved her and destroyed her".⁵

It must be admitted that this view on love is very similar to some of Poe's loves and also close to Borel's view as expressed in Madame Champavert.

²A. E. Carter, op. cit., p. 25

³Ibid., p. 26

⁴Praz, op. cit., pp. 70-71.

⁵Byron, Manfred, II, 1. Cited by Praz, op. cit., p. 80

Baudelaire himself was among the first to notice how life, as depicted by Choderlos de Laclos in Les Liaisons dangereuses had reached that degree of depravity which the decadents found most satisfying. Baudelaire, in the notes which he prepared in 1856-1857 for a study of Laclos' book, makes the following statement on the amorality professed by the Marquise de Merteuil and Valmont: "En réalité, le satanisme a gagné, Satan s'est fait ingénu. Le mal se connaissant était moins affreux et plus près de la guérison que le mal s'ignorant. G. Sand inférieur à de Sade".⁶ He then goes on to collect quotations from the book, one of which evokes his comment: "Source de la sensualité mystique et des sottises amoureuses du dix-neuvième siècle".⁷ And in fact, in the quotation which follows, there is already a crystallization of the main themes used by the decadents: sexual aberrations accompanied by the "spice" of sacrilege and blasphemy which is necessary to arouse the jaded appetites of the "fin de siècle"; the whole expressed in liturgical terms used profanely, a device which became a characteristic of Baudelaire's own work. (The remarks in parenthesis and italics are Baudelaire's own):

J'aurai cette femme. Je l'enlèverai au mari, qui la profane
 G. Sand . J'oserai la ravir au Dieu même qu'elle adore
 Valmont Satan, rival de Dieu . Quel délice d'être tour à tour

⁶Baudelaire, CE. comp., pp. 996-997

⁷Ibid., p. 1000

l'objet et le vainqueur de ses remords. Loin de moi l'idée de détruire les préjugés qui l'assiègent. Ils ajouteront à mon bonheur et à ma gloire. Qu'elle croie à la vertu, mais qu'elle me la sacrifie...qu'alors, si j'y consens, elle me dise: "Je t'adore!"

Lettre VI - Valmont à la
Meurteuil.

The Marquis de Sade, in his writings, provided a catalogue of perversions which would prove rich source-material for the decadents in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Depravity and sexual perversion were, for Sade, a means to attack Nature, for, following Rousseau, he identified Nature with the normal. Thus perversion became a way of distinguishing oneself from the rest of mankind by a studied and deliberate pursuit of the abnormal. Sade wrote in Justine:

C'est elle [la Nature] que je voudrais pouvoir outrager. Je voudrais déranger ses plans, contrecarrer sa marche, arrêter le cours des astres, bouleverser les globes qui flottent dans l'espace, détruire ce qui la sert, protéger ce qui lui nuit, édifie ce qui l'irrite, l'insulter en un mot dans ses oeuvres.⁸

This is the premise, though less obsessively expressed perhaps, from which the cult of artifice, conceived as a gauntlet hurled in the face of Nature, will spring.

There are the same decadent tendencies expressed in the early writings of Gautier, the Gautier of "bas romantisme", Bouzinguo, friend of Borel and O'Neddy; already in 1833, in his preface to Les Jeunes-France, he wrote about Nature in true decadent style:

⁸Cited by Baudelaire, Crit. comp., p. 1000

⁹Sade, Justine (Paris, Foucade, 1930), IV, 40-41. Cited by Praz, op.cit., p. 105.

Je n'ai vu la mer que dans les marines de Vernet; je ne connais d'autres montagnes que Montmartre. Je n'ai jamais vu se lever le soleil...Je suis un Parisien complet...Les arbres des Tuileries et des boulevards sont mes forêts; la Seine, mon océan...Je ne trouve le soleil beaucoup supérieur au gaz...Je déteste la campagne, toujours des arbres, de la terre du gazon! C'est ennuyeux à crever.¹⁰

Gautier also helped to confirm Baudelaire in his theory of "Correspondances"; firstly, by his articles in La Presse in 1840, when he spoke of dancing being "de la mélodie visible, et, si l'on peut parler ainsi, où les jambes chantent très harmonieusement pour les yeux".¹¹ More important, however, in the forming of this theory according to which "les parfums, les couleurs et les sons se répondent"¹², was the article which he contributed to La Presse, July 10, 1843. In describing the effects of hashish, he shows a state of hallucination during which the senses melt one into another, forming a strange and ethereal type of beauty:

Dans un air confusément lumineux, voltigeaient avec un fourmillement perpétuel des milliards de papillons dont les ailes bruissaient comme des éventails. De gigantesques fleurs au calice de cristal, d'énormes passeroles, des lis d'or et d'argent montaient et s'épanouissaient autour de moi avec une

¹⁰Cited by Carter, op. cit., p. 7.

¹¹Cited by Starkie, op. cit., p. 234.

¹²Baudelaire, "Correspondances", CE. comp., p. 87.

crépitacion pareille à celle des bouquets de feux d'artifice. Mon ouïe s'était prodigieusement développée; j'entendais le bruit des couleurs. Des sons verts, rouges, bleus, jaunes m'arrivaient par ondes parfaites, distinctes.¹³

The decadent cult of depravity and sexual perversion, practised in order to gain new sensations, is also represented in Gautier's writings. In Une Nuit de Cléopâtre (1845) the Queen possesses enough "decadent" traits, to make her the feminine pendant to the world-weary Des Esseintes. Carter speaks of her as "a typical decadent type, a woman whom boredom has led her to sadism; satiated, she is looking for new pleasures in sanguinary depravity".¹⁴ Gautier had written: "Cléopâtre...demandait un plaisir nouveau, une sensation inconnue... Elle songeait que le nombre des sens est bien borné... Essayer des poisons sur des esclaves, faire battre des hommes avec des tigres... tout cela est fade et commun".¹⁵ Even more so in Mademoiselle de Maupin Gautier chose the subject of transvesticism with all its inherent ambiguities, to air his decadent leanings. The novel is a paean to homosexuality, male and female, prompting Carter to remark: "The novel is like a diptych: pederasty on one side, lesbianism on the other".¹⁶ The cult of artifice leading, inevitably, to sexual perversion, is manifest in D'Albert's attitude to sensuality:

¹³Cited by H. Trudgian, op. cit., p. 183.

¹⁴Carter, op. cit., p. 38

¹⁵Cited by Carter, op. cit., p. 38.

¹⁶Carter, op. cit., p. 41.

J'ai eu ma maîtresse au bain...la nuit, au clair de lune, dans une gondole avec de la musique...dans sa voiture lancée au grand galop, au milieu du bruit des roues, des sauts et des cahots... Je suis entré chez elle par la fenêtre, ayant la clef dans ma poche. Je l'ai fait venir chez moi en plein jour, etc.¹⁷

But it is in the "Notice" which Gautier wrote for the 1868 edition of Les Fleurs du Mal, that Carter sees the full measure of the poet's decadent tendencies. The "Notice", after establishing that Baudelaire continually sings the praises of artifice, both in his conception of Beauty and in his view of woman, uses the terms "modernism", "decadence" and "artifice" almost synonymously, arriving at the statement:

La dépravation, l'écart du type normal, est impossible à la bête, fatalement conduite par l'instinct immuable. C'est par la même raison que les poètes "inspirés", n'ayant pas la conscience et la direction de leur oeuvre, lui causaient une sorte d'aversion, et qu'il voulait introduire l'art et le travail même dans l'originalité.¹⁸

Carter gives great significance to this statement, seeing it as a summary of decadent art, since Gautier views depravity, in the statement, as the most finished form of artificiality, the greatest insult to Nature, precisely as Sade had realized. Thus in view of this "theoretical justification"¹⁹ of sexual perversions, vice, decay and corruption, as provided by Gautier's "Notice", the decadent nature of many poems by Baudelaire may be seen in its true context.

¹⁷Gautier, Mlle. de Maupin (Paris, Charpentier, 1927), pp. 101-102.

¹⁸Cited by Carter, op. cit., p. 16.

¹⁹Carter, op. cit., p. 15.

11. Baudelaire the decadent poet

Those aspects of Baudelaire's poetry which commentators have classed as "decadent" find their place within the architecture of Les Fleurs de Mal, since they express "spleen" and man's taste for evil. In the decadent phase of Baudelaire's development we are at the opposite pole to his final spirituality. This examination of the lowest depths of life, expressed by the decadents, is common to the works of both Baudelaire and Huysmans before each started on the upward trend which would lead them to seek a spiritual solution to the dilemma of life.

Baudelaire's revolt against Romantic poetry led him to adopt the decadent revolt against Rousseau, but deeper than any literary conceit was his belief that as a result of original sin, man is prone to evil by the simple perverseness of his nature. Thus we find him writing: "Mais je ne veux, pour le présent, tenir compte que de la grande vérité oubliée—la perversité primordiale de l'homme—nous sommes tous nés marqués par le mal".²⁰ Bearing this principle in mind, it becomes a little easier to approach the intention of a work containing both "Les Phares" and "Danse macabre".

Every aspect of what has been termed the "aesthetic of decadence" is treated in the writings of Baudelaire, a fact which helps to explain why Huysmans gave such a place of pre-eminence in A Rebours to the poet of Les Fleurs du Mal. Nature did not seem to possess, for Baudelaire,

²⁰ Baudelaire, "Préface" to Nouvelles Histoires extraordinaires CE comp., (Paris, Conard, 1933), VII, IX.

the beauty with which the Romantics had endowed her. He regarded nature as merely a source of raw material, which became beautiful only when the poet's sensibility had transformed her. In a letter to Ferdinand Desnoyers, who in 1855, had solicited his contribution to a collection of poetry and prose in praise of the forest of Fontainebleau, Baudelaire wrote:

Vous me demandez des vers sur la Nature, n'est-ce pas? Sur les bois, les grands chênes, la verdure, les insectes, le soleil sans doute? Mais vous savez bien que je suis incapable de m'attendrir sur les végétaux...J'ai même toujours pensé qu'il y avait dans la Nature, florissante et rajeunie quelque chose d'impudent et d'affligeant...Dans le fond des bois, enfermé sous ces voûtes semblables à celles des sacristies et des cathédrales, je pense à nos étonnantes villes, et la prodigieuse musique qui roule sur les sommets me semble la traduction des lamentations humaines.²¹

The preference for the great city as opposed to the countryside was a quirk on which the decadents particularly prided themselves.

Then there occurs in his writings on Constantin Guys, "le peintre de la vie moderne", the "Eloge du maquillage", which is a direct attack on the Romantic sentimentalizing about Nature, together with a refutation of the eighteenth century belief in the perfection of the natural state. Contrary to Rousseau, Baudelaire does not believe that man in the natural state is perfect nor that it is civilization which corrupts him.

²¹Baudelaire, OE. comp., (Conard), Correspondance generale, 1, 321-323.

In singing the praises of artifice, he is orchestrating one of the most important themes of decadence.

La plupart des erreurs relatives au beau naissent de la fausse conception du dix-huitième siècle relative à la morale. La Nature fut prise dans ce temps-là comme base, source et type de tout bien et de tout beau possibles. La négation du péché originel ne fut pas pour peu de chose dans l'aveuglement général de cette époque...la nature n'enseigne rien, ou presque rien, c'est-à-dire qu'elle contraint l'homme à dormir, à boire, à manger...C'est elle aussi qui pousse l'homme à tuer son semblable, à le manger, à le séquestrer...la nature ne peut conseiller que le crime...C'est la philosophie je parle de la bonne, c'est la religion qui nous ordonnent de nourrir des parents pauvres et intimes. La nature qui n'est pas autre chose que la voix de notre intérêt nous commande de les assommer... Tout ce qui est beau et noble est le résultat de la raison et du calcul. Le crime, dont l'animal humain a puisé le goût dans le ventre de sa mère, est originellement naturel. La vertu, au contraire, est artificielle, surnaturelle, puis qu'il a fallu, dans les temps et chez toutes les nations, des dieux et des prophètes pour l'enseigner à l'humanité animalisée.²²

In any examination of the decadent aspects of Baudelaire's poetry, this text is capital. As may be seen, the interdependence of aesthetics and morality in Les Fleurs du Mal springs from the intimate bond which existed in his mind between the idea of original sin and the cult of artifice. Since nature and her teachings are evil, the artificiality of civilization will be the very subject-matter of his poems. This conception is pushed furthest perhaps in a poem such as "Une Charogne", which has gone beyond life in the city, to the

²²Baudelaire, OE. comp., pp. 911-912.

depiction of the anti-natural, to decay and corruption. Here aesthetic beauty in ugliness, which inspired such a thought as "Le Beau est toujours bizarre"²³, and the moral paradox inherent in "flowers of evil", are so intermingled, that, though the poem is an exercise in the depiction of a certain type of decadent beauty, the total effect is a moral one; the "message" being precisely that of Ash Wednesday, "Remember, man, that thou art dust, and unto dust thou shalt return", etc. This is clearly the poet's intention when, after contrasting the beauty of his mistress with the decomposing carrion, he writes,

Et pourtant vous serez semblable à cette ordure,
A cette horrible infection,
Étoile de mes yeux, soleil de ma nature,
Vous, mon ange et ma passion!²⁴

In the chapter entitled, "Eloge du maquillage", Baudelaire's distaste for nature leads him straight to the praise of artificiality. He preferred women to be plastered with make-up and drenched in perfume for he believed that to "gild the lily" was to improve it. Nature can be improved easily by the use of man's ingenuity. The "Eloge du maquillage" concludes as follows: "Le maquillage n'a pas à se cacher, à éviter de se laisser deviner; il peut, au contraire, s'étaler, sinon avec affectation, au moins avec une espèce de candeur."²⁵

²³Baudelaire, "Curiosités esthétiques", OE. comp., p. 691.

²⁴Baudelaire, OE. comp., p. 106.

²⁵Baudelaire, OE. comp., p. 401.

Also Samuel Cramer, undoubtedly a self-portrait, who appears in La Fanfarlo (1847) has the same bizarre tastes. Mademoiselle Fanfarlo, a dancer, in order to please her tyrannical lover, must dress up as Columbine, one of her roles, and must be highly rouged. "Ce trait caractéristique", adds Baudelaire, "ne m'a nullement étonné... (Cramer) aimera toujours le rouge, et la céruse, le chrysocale et les oripeaux de toute sorte. Il repeindrait volontiers les arbres et le ciel".²⁶

The next logical step in decadent sensibility - from artifice to the portrayal of depravity - is treated in the great cycle of the erotic poems, most of which were addressed to Jeanne Duval. Such is the naked sincerity of these poems, that one senses behind the sado-masochism of a piece such as "L'Heautontimorouménos", the disappointment with love which arose in the first instance in Baudelaire when his mother married again. In a poem such as "A une Madone", all the decadent themes are marshalled by Baudelaire. The beloved is described in the terms generally reserved for the Virgin, but with a sensuality excluded from the liturgical texts. Before our eyes the classic statue of Mary stamping on the serpent grows, and her garments are made from the poet's respectful tears, while the serpent is the poet's jealousy. But this quasi-blasphemous banter is crowned in the last eight lines by the poet's sadistic desire to hurt his mistress, in order to "mêler l'amour avec

²⁶Baudelaire, OE comp., p. 401.

la barbarie, Volupté noire! " The poem ends:

des sept péchés capitaux,
 Bourreau plein de remords, je ferai sept Couteaux,
 Bien affilés, et comme un jongleur insensible,
 Prenant le plus profond de ton amour pour cible,
 Je les planterai tous dans ton cœur pantelant,
 Dans ton Cœur sanglotant, dans ton Cœur ruisselant!²⁷

These lines recall the feeling described in the controversial final strophe of "A Celle qui est trop gaie", which caused that poem to be banned in 1857. The final step in perversion, masochism, is treated in "L'Heautontimorouménos". Here the poet describes the state of mind of the flagellant, but again the moral tone, implying an obsessional self-disgust not far removed from the Christian teaching on humility, is the main effect achieved in the lines:

Je suis la plaie et le couteau!
 Je suis le soufflet et la joue!
 Je suis les membres et la roue,
 Et la victime et le bourreau!

Je suis de mon cœur le vampire,
 -Un de ces grands abandonnés
 Au rire éternel condamnés,
 Et qui ne peuvent plus sourire!²⁸

²⁷Baudelaire, OE. comp., p. 132.

²⁸Baudelaire, OE. comp., p. 150.

Praz, in his summary of the decadent poems of Baudelaire, sees hovering in the background the dark, satanic figure of the Marquis de Sade:

The case of Baudelaire, indeed, was not very different from that of Delacroix; perhaps it had some affinity with that of Swinburne. His inexhaustible need to be occupied with macabre and obscene objects, his desire to terrify and to shock people... these are traceable to one and the same source. "L'escalier secret de l'alcôve" [an allusion to the works of Sade] in this case is only to be opened with the one particular key which Sainte-Beuve recommended should not be forgotten.²⁹

But Praz again overstates his case by ignoring the accompanying spiritual vein of even the decadent poems. With his interest in decadence Baudelaire reached his spiritual nadir, but the way was prepared thereby for the upward trend of his later years.

iii. The "breviary of the Decadence"

These are the aspects of Baudelaire's work which are most fully treated in A Rebours, and Des Esseintes, the decadent hero "par excellence", is to a large extent modelled on the early Baudelaire and on his creation, Samuel Cramer. Henry Lafai, in an article summarizing Baudelaire's influence on Huysmans, evokes the atmosphere common to the works of both authors:

²⁹Praz, op. cit., p. 151.

Comme l'Enchanteur disparu, notre J.-K...aimera les peintres, la grand'ville...les chiffonniers et les filles, les parfums, les sons, les saveurs et leurs secrètes correspondances, l'éclat des mots, l'art et même l'artifice et aussi le sarcasme amer. Il chérira comme lui le mystère, qui envoûte, l'au-delà, le Diable ou Dieu, suivant l'heure, les livres oubliés, les bijoux perdus, les chats silencieux, les fleurs étranges.³⁰

Pierre Dufay, also, sees the influence of the poet on Huysmans, and quotes René Martineau's definition of the author of A Rebours which appeared in his Leon Bloyet la "Femme pauvre". M. Dufay writes:

La définition de M. René Martineau est singulièrement heureuse: "Huysmans. Le plus baudelairien des baudelairiens". Elle est tellement vraie, cette définition, que, relisant la Fanfarlo, oeuvre de la jeunesse de Baudelaire...on y retrouve, non seulement Baudelaire mais aussi des Esseintes: "Créature malade et fantastique...nature ténébreuse, bariolée de vifs éclairs, - paresseuse et entreprenante à la fois, - féconde en dessins difficiles et en risibles avortements; esprit chez qui le paradoxe prenait souvent les proportions de la naïveté, et dont l'imagination était aussi vaste que la solitude et la paresse absolues" [La Fanfarlo. OE. compl., p. 377]. N'est-ce pas un portrait? Et les traits s'en précisent. Si jeune qu'il fût, Baudelaire s'était déjà regardé vivre et n'avait pas été dupe de ses attitudes.³¹

³⁰ H. Lefai, "Huysmans et Baudelaire", Bulletin de la Société J.-K. Huysmans, 27 (1954), 101.

³¹ P. Dufay, "Une source ignorée d'"A Rebours"", Mercur de France, August 15, 1934, CLIV, 54-55.

Finally, Robert Baldick's summary of the debt owed by Huysmans to Baudelaire, in this second, decadent stage of their spiritual development, will serve as an introduction to a study of the decadent themes treated in A Rebours. As well as the aesthetic similitudes, Baldick remarks upon the spiritual similarities which exist between the two men and which are particularly marked in this decadent phase:

It is, of course, of Baudelaire that the reader is irresistibly reminded when reading Huysmans' novel. In the first place, there can be no doubt that the title and theme of A Rebours owe much to Baudelaire's paradoxical praise of artifice, and that his revolt against conventional ideas of the beauty of Nature inspired Des Esseintes' comment that "... la nature a fait son temps, elle a définitivement lassé, par la dégoûtante uniformité de ses paysages et de ses ciels, l'attentive patience des raffinés [A Rebours, OE. comp., VII, 35]... And quite apart from these and other aesthetic analogies a study of A Rebours affords evidence of a very real spiritual kinship between the two authors, and shows how well Huysmans understood the terrible sickness of the soul which lies at the root of Les Fleurs du Mal.³²

The passage in Baudelaire to which Baldick refers as having inspired the title and theme of Huysmans' novel, occurs among the "Fragments divers" which were found at Baudelaire's death and have been published in his complete works. Baudelaire wrote: "Appliquer à la joie, au se sentir vivre, l'idée d'hyperacuité des sens, appliquée par Poe à la douleur. Opérer une création par la pure logique du contraire. Le sentier est tout tracé, à rebours".³³ From this it may be seen that

³²Baldick, op. cit., pp. 82-83.

³³Baudelaire, OE. comp., p. 1280.

both men, Huysmans following directly upon Baudelaire, consciously used decadence, not only as a tool to deepen their own sensibility, but also as a means of finding a new "divertissement" in vice to fill the void in their lives.

Even more apparent in A Rebours is the Baudelairean influence in Des Esseintes' espousal of the doctrine of "Correspondances". Departing from the premise, "l'artifice paraissait à des Esseintes la marque distinctive du génie de l'homme",³⁴ Huysmans conducts his hero through a series of experiments in sensation exactly like those which had first been suggested to Baudelaire in his readings of Swedenborg and Hoffmann. Thus Des Esseintes composes "poems" made up of various perfumes; naturally the poems which he takes for his models come from Les Fleurs du Mal. He chooses "L'Irréparable" and "Le Balcon" where the fifth line of a stanza is an echo of the first, and so, in his "compositions" of scents, he conforms to the pattern:

Il s'égarait dans les songes qu'évoquaient pour lui ces stances aromatiques, ramené soudain à son point de départ, au motif de sa méditation, par le retour du thème initial, reparaissant, à des intervalles ménagés, dans l'odorante orchestration du poème.³⁵

The most celebrated example of the use to which Des Esseintes put the theory of "Correspondances" was, of course, his "orgue à bouche". On this "instrument", whose drawers were labelled "flûte, cor, voix

³⁴ A Rebours. OE. comp., VII, 35.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 177

céleste", and which contained various liqueurs, "Des Esseintes buvait une goutte, ici, là se jouait des symphonies intérieures, arrivait à se procurer, dans le gosier, des sensations analogues à celles que la musique verse à l'oreille".³⁶ He then proceeded to catalogue the various tastes, saying that kummel "corresponded" to the oboe, kirsch to the trumpet, gin and whisky to the trombone, and brandy to the tuba; and he concluded with the finished product:

Il arrivait même à transférer dans sa mâchoire de véritables morceaux de musique, suivant le compositeur, pas à pas, rendant sa pensée, ses effets, ses nuances, par des unions ou des contrastes voisins de liqueurs, par d'approximatifs et savants mélanges. D'autres fois, il composait lui-même des mélodies.³⁷

But, as has been the case with all the decadent writers, as we have seen, this taste for the artificial leads inevitably to the depiction of perversions and depravity. Thus we find in chapter nine, the details of Des Esseintes' "experiments" with human beings, in his account of his old love-affairs. His tastes here reveal a great affinity with Baudelaire's wildly exaggerated stories of his own strange conquests, which he would recount to a circle of admirers in some Paris café of the eighteen-forties. In Des Esseintes' account, there was the acrobat, "miss Urania, une Américaine, au corps bien découpé, aux jambes nerveuses, aux muscles d'acier, aux bras de fonte".³⁸

³⁶ Ibid., p. 71.

³⁷ Ibid., pp. 72-73.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 156.

In this relationship Des Esseintes seeks a complete change of sex by both parties, since mere sensuality is not enough, but he is disappointed. His latent homosexuality is treated in the relationship with the youth whom he met on the Avenue de Latour-Maubourg. The description given of the boy is the least derogatory of these portraits and Des Esseintes' memory of the relationship is that "jamais...il ne s'était senti plus douloureusement satisfait"³⁹; and also "Parmi les rappels qui l'assiégeaient, dans sa solitude, celui de ce réciproque attachement dominait les autres".⁴⁰

Among this catalogue of perversions, sadism finds its place in the incident with the youth whom Des Esseintes wished to turn into a criminal by showing him the pleasures of the decadent life and then abandoning him to his former life of drudgery. Des Esseintes explains: "la vérité, c'est que je tâche simplement de préparer un assassin",⁴¹ in this, he is, happily, unsuccessful. This incident illustrates precisely the intention which was ascribed to Baudelaire by Emile Blondet, in his description of the following incident, which appeared in La Lune, September 15, 1867, and which Huysmans may have read:

...un soir, -nous sortions de la première représentation de Rédemption, d'Octave Feuillet, au Vaudeville...Une femme soule titubait sur le trottoir de la rue Richelieu...Baudelaire alla

³⁹Ibid... p. 166.

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹Ibid... p. 108.

à elle et lui mit quarante sous dans la main...Puis avec componction:- "Comme cela fait bien d'encourager le vice!"⁴²

Two further incidents of a similar sadistic nature appear in A Rebours. The first, Des Esseintes' plot to contrive the divorce of his friend d'Aigurande without the latter's knowledge, is successful and finds its place most appropriately in chapter six, the chapter dealing with sadism and perverted sex, "le terrible chapitre VI dont le chiffre correspond, sans intentions préconçues, à celui du Commandement de Dieu qu'il offense".⁴³ The other incident concerns a group of urchins fighting over some morsels of bread. Des Esseintes tells the servant to throw them some more bread, with the amiable wish:

...que les plus faibles soient estropiés, n'aient part à aucun morceau et soient, de plus, rossés d'importance par leurs familles quand ils rentreront chez elles les culottes déchirées et les yeux meurtris; cela leur donnera un aperçu de la vie qui les attend!⁴⁴

Pierre Cogny finds in this incident an echo of the situation described by Baudelaire in "Le Gâteau"⁴⁵, but the ending used by Huysmans is far more pessimistic than that of Baudelaire.

Praz notes that a strange affinity in decadent literature between sadism and a kind of neo-Catholicism, which is also depicted by

⁴²Cited by Bandy and Pichois, op. cit., p. 273.

⁴³Huysmans, "Preface" to A Rebours, CE. comp., VII, XVI.

⁴⁴Huysmans, A Rebours, CE. comp., VII, 258.

⁴⁵Baudelaire, Le Spleen de Paris, CE. comp., pp. 301-303.

Huysmans in A Rebours:

Sadism and Catholicism, in French decadent literature become the two poles between which the souls of neurotic and sensual writers oscillate and which can definitely be traced back to that "épicurien à l'imagination catholique" Sainte-Beuve's definition in Chateaubriand et son groupe - Chateaubriand.⁴⁶

Des Esseintes' soul, exhausted by sexual and sadistic excess, flies to this other "pole" of decadent sensibility, and indeed the whole of A Rebours is faintly permeated with the scent of incense. The first decadent leaning towards the externals of religion which are conceived simply as a source of Beauty marks already the first step made by Huysmans from the abyss of decadence on the road to Rome. In this he greatly resembled his predecessor, Baudelaire. For both Baudelaire and Huysmans preferred, at first, merely to seek in religion a new sensation, the pleasure to be gained by a diseased sensibility from blasphemy and sacrilege; even sensuality was given a new dimension, for as Baudelaire wrote: "Moi, je dis: la volupté unique et suprême de l'amour gît dans la certitude de faire le mal. - Et l'homme et la femme savent de naissance que dans le mal se trouve toute volupté."⁴⁷

In this further example of artificiality, we can understand Des Esseintes' pleasure at possessing consecrated articles and enjoying the thought of sacrilege in the use to which he put them:

⁴⁶ Praz, op. cit., p. 307.

⁴⁷ Baudelaire, Journaux intimes, CE. compl., p. 1191.

...il en venait à se demander s'il ne commettait pas un sacrilège, en possédant des objets autrefois consacrés, des canons d'église, des chasubles et des custodes; et, cette pensée d'un état peccamineux lui apportait une sorte d'orgueil et d'allègement; il y mêlait des plaisirs de sacrilège.⁴⁸

But as well as this sacrilegious interest which he takes in Catholicism, Des Esseintes is already more deeply concerned with religion than he is prepared to admit and thus we see in A Rebours the thread of religious conversion which runs throughout his works. Remembering the Jesuits who taught him, Des Esseintes muses, "j'ai, depuis mon enfance, et sans que je l'aie jamais su, ce levain qui n'avait pas encore fermenté; ce penchant même que j'ai toujours eu pour les objets religieux en est peut-être une preuve".⁴⁹ Finally he is even tempted to see his whole interest in artifice, and hence in decadence, in terms of a religious quest for an ideal, and so makes for us the point that this interest was but a stage in his development:

Ainsi ses tendances vers l'artifice, ses besoins d'excentricité, n'étaient-ils pas, en somme, des résultats d'études spéculatives, de raffinements extra-terrestres, de spéculations quasi théologiques; c'étaient, au fond, des transports, des élans vers un idéal, vers un univers inconnu, vers une béatitude lointaine, désirable comme celle que nous promettent les Ecritures.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Baudelaire, A Rebours, OE. comp., VII, 124.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 118.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 120

But Des Esseintes is not ready for conversion yet, and so to satisfy his curiosity for the supernatural, turns, as did Huysmans himself, to see that, "En face d'un Dieu omnipotent, se dressait maintenant un rival plein de force, le Démon".⁵¹ Thus it is towards Satanism that Huysmans will turn to seek an answer to the impasse in which his desire to believe was continually at odds with his intellect. The writing of Ia-bas was to be the decisive factor in his conversion. Meanwhile, Des Esseintes, obsessed by this vague mysticism, looked for a similar preoccupation in the works of his favourite authors, and found it especially in the writings of Baudelaire and Barbey d'Aurevilly, where sadism and mysticism were treated together. In a summary of d'Aurevilly's book of short stories, les Diaboliques, Des Esseintes indicated the importance which sadism and sacrilege had for himself, intimating that, in this case, he is imitating Baudelaire:

Après certaines pièces de Baudelaire, qui, à l'imitation des chants clamés pendant les nuits du sabbat, célébraient des litanies infernales, ce volume était, parmi toutes les oeuvres de la littérature apostolique contemporaine, le seul qui témoignât de cette situation d'esprit tout à la fois dévote et impie, vers laquelle les revenez-y du catholicisme, stimulés par les accès de la névrose, avaient souvent poussé des Esseintes.⁵²

The third step which Huysmans, following Baudelaire's lead, was to take along the road to Rome was to be a last glorification of the

⁵¹Ibid., p. 124

⁵²Ibid., p. 244

paradox of artificiality - the cult of Satan as opposed to the worship of God. Baudelaire had fully exploited this possibility and, as such, played no small part in orientating Huysmans' thoughts in that direction, as Helen Trudgian remarks: "Baudelaire et Barbey lui indiquent deux routes qui conduisent "out of the world"."⁵³ In the cult of Satan, the third stage of the spiritual development of Baudelaire and Huysmans, both men proceeded as far as it was possible for them to outrage nature. After such an excess, the pendulum swung to the other extreme with each struggling to find peace in convention and orthodoxy. Let us ~~follow~~ then follow them to Hell, on their journey of inspection.

⁵³H. Trudgian, op. cit., p. 137.

Chapter III

SATANISM

1.) "La Révolte"

Man's struggle against evil, and his aspirations towards Good, which are the two themes on which the Fleurs du Mal were based, were further amplified in a note which Baudelaire recorded in Mon Coeur mis à nu:

Il y a dans tout homme, à toute heure, deux postulations simultanées, l'une vers Dieu, l'autre vers Satan. L'invocation à Dieu, ou spiritualité, est un désir de monter en grade; celle de Satan, ou animalité, est une joie de descendre.¹

This dichotomy in man's nature is studied under the headings, "Spleen et Idéal" in the Fleurs du Mal, and Baudelaire, who became more and more haunted, as he grew older, by the Christian concept of original sin, saw the hand of Satan as ruling man's destiny. Writing of the power of the perverse in man, an idea of his own which had been strengthened by his reading Poe, he said:

Il y a dans l'homme...une force mystérieuse dont la philosophie moderne ne veut pas tenir compte; et cependant, sans cette

¹Baudelaire, CE. compl., p. 1311.

force innommée, sans ce penchant primordial, une foule d'actions humaines resteront inexpliquées, inexplicables. Ces actions n'ont d'attrait que parce que elles sont mauvaises, dangereuses; elles possèdent l'attrance du gouffre.²

We find another indication of his preoccupation with what he conceived to be the battle between God and Satan for mens' souls, in his "Projets de Préface pour Les Fleurs du Mal", which he wrote between 1859 and 1860. In this note he fears that the Devil's subtlety may be proving too much for man's intelligence:

Le Diable. Le péché originel. Homme bon. Si vous vouliez, vous seriez le favori du Tyran; il est plus difficile d'aimer Dieu que de croire en lui. Au contraire, il est plus difficile aux gens de ce siècle de croire au diable que de l'aimer. Tout le monde le sent et personne n'y croit. Sublime subtilité du diable.³

This, however, is the mature Baudelaire, the moralist whose final work was tending towards a more coherent, if a more resigned, view of the universe, than the satanic dandy of the eighteen-forties. Without entering too far into the controversy which rages around the dating of many of the poems in Les Fleurs de Mal, it seems just to say that those poems espousing satanic revolt seem to belong more appropriately to the earlier years especially to those which Baudelaire spent at the

²Baudelaire, "Notes nouvelles sur Edgar Poe", Nouvelles Histoires extraordinaires, OE. comp. (Paris, Conard, 1933), VII, IX.

³Baudelaire, OE. comp., p. 1380.

Hôtel Lauzun. Here Dr. Starkie's view can most readily be accepted, albeit with a certain caution perhaps:

It is possible to believe that all the blasphemous poems were composed in the first period of Baudelaire's literary career, before he was twenty-five, at an age when it was considered daring and amusing to blaspheme and to defy the power which had formerly been cited by the elders to quell youthful independence, God Almighty. It was considered more bold in the eighties than it would be today, to express agnostic sentiments and contempt for Christian ideals, especially in a society in which Catholicism was symbolic of respectability.⁴

Satan's place in Les Fleurs de Mal is defined in "Au Lecteur". He is responsible for man's proclivity towards evil, for "C'est le Diable qui tient les fils qui nous remuent".⁵ Also in "La Destruction" we see how Satan has penetrated Baudelaire to such an extent that he has become part of his personality:

Sans cesse à mes côtés s'agite le Démon;
 Il nage autour de moi comme un air impalpable;
 Je l'avale et le sens qui brûle mon poumon
 Et l'emplit d'un désir éternel et coupable.⁶

This inner presence of Satan is again mentioned in a letter to Flaubert who had written to Baudelaire expressing surprise at the extent to which

⁴ Starkie, op. cit., p. 113.

⁵ Baudelaire, OE. comp., p. 81.

⁶ Ibid., p. 151.

the Principle of Evil had entered into the Paradis artificiels.

Baudelaire replied: "étant descendu très sévèrement dans le souvenir de mes rêveries, je me suis aperçu que, de tout temps, j'ai été obsédé par l'impossibilité de me rendre compte de certaines actions ou pensées soudaines de l'homme, sans l'hypothèse de l'intervention d'une force méchante, extérieure à lui".⁷

However, besides this aspect of Apologetics, there is, in Les Fleurs de Mal, the desire to shock, which was the chief characteristic of Baudelaire's dandyism. This gives rise to the blasphemy of the poems gathered under the heading of "Révolte". There is a certain incoherence in this sollicitude for humanity, plagued by Satan's wiles, coupled with the obvious pleasure in blasphemy in such a poem as "Les Litanies de Satan", and Milner sees here a fundamental contradiction in Baudelaire's nature: "on ne peut aimer à la fois le mal et l'humanité...Or Baudelaire ne veut renoncer ni au vertige du blasphème, de l'exaltation du mal pour le mal, ni à cette protestation contre les limitations de la condition humaine".⁸ Whether or not these opposing forces, aspiration towards good and pleasure in evil, continued throughout Baudelaire's life, as Milner suggests, or whether, in his more mature years, he renounced the attraction of Satan which is the view held by Dr. Starkie and most modern critics (Sartre excluded), cannot be satisfactorily resolved as yet owing to the incomplete nature of information as to the

⁷ Baudelaire, Letter of 26 June 1860, Correspondance générale (Paris, Conard, 1948), III, 125.

⁸ Max Milner, Le Diable dans la littérature française de Gazotte à Baudelaire (1772-1861) (Paris, José Corti, 1960), II, 435.

dating of certain individual poems. It seems more likely, to the present writer, that blasphemy best belongs to the earlier period and would seem inappropriate in the later years of the poet's life. But to this question there seems to be no certain answer.

Meanwhile, to review the uses which Baudelaire makes of blasphemy in his writings, we approach first the three poems which compose the section called "Révolte" in the Fleurs du Mal. In the 1861 edition, this section is placed just before the final group of poems on death, after the erotic poems, in which the poet sought a "divertissement" in love; after the praises of beauty, the finest of Satan's devices designed to tempt men; and after the poems of disgust with debauchery and decadence, and disappointment with wine as a source of pleasure. The attempt at revolt follows almost directly on the most direct of Baudelaire's expressions of revulsion with love, "Un Voyage à Cythère", in which he cries:

Dans ton île, ô Vénus! je n'ai trouvé debout
Qu'un gibet symbolique où pendait mon image...⁹

The first description of a blasphemous nature is attributed to Saint Peter, who, like Baudelaire is disgusted with "un monde où l'action n'est pas la soeur du rêve".¹⁰

⁹Baudelaire, CE. comp., p. 159.

¹⁰Baudelaire, "Le Reniement de Saint Pierre", CE. comp., p.p. 190-191.

In the lines:

- Ah! Jésus, souviens-toi du Jardin des Clives!
 Dans ta simplicité tu priais à genoux
 Celui qui dans son ciel riait au bruit des clous
 Que d'ignobles bourreaux plantaient dans tes chairs vives.¹¹

the echo is of Vigny's "Le Mont des Oliviers"; although Vigny's pessimism is not the explicit revolt of Baudelaire.

To Christ's pleas on the Mount of Clives, Vigny opposes the "silence éternel de la Divinité",¹² while Baudelaire accuses God of enjoying man's pain, in the person of His son. This provokes Baudelaire's boast in the last two lines in which the pride of the dandy, of the poet who described Don Juan's disdainful pride, is most certainly mingled:

Puisse-je user du glaive et périr par le glaive!
 Saint Pierre a renié Jésus...il a bien fait!¹³

Baudelaire himself, in a note to the first edition of Les Fleurs du Mal, seeking to justify this poem's inclusion in the moral plan of the book, gave us the lead in its interpretation, when he wrote of the section on revolt:

¹¹ Ibid., p. 190.

¹² Vigny, "Le Mont des Oliviers", Ceuvres complètes, (Paris, Pléiade, 1955) I, p. 208.

¹³ Baudelaire, "Le Reniement de Saint Pierre", OE. comp., p. 191.

Parmi les morceaux suivants, le plus caractérisé a déjà paru dans un des principaux recueils littéraires de Paris [la Revue de Paris, October 1852], où il n'a été considéré, du moins par les gens d'esprit, que pour ce qu'il est véritablement: le pastiche des raisonnements de l'ignorance et de la fureur. Fidèle à son douloureux programme, l'auteur des Fleurs du Mal a dû, en parfait comédien, façonner son esprit à tous les sophismes comme à toutes les corruptions.¹⁴

In the second "revolt" poem, "Abel et Cain", Baudelaire returns to the Romantic conception of the Satanic hero - the haughty figure shrouded in a black cloak who has no place among the humdrum cares of everyday people. In Cain, Baudelaire celebrates the first exceptional human being, the man with the courage to be the first to renounce God in favour of Satan. There is a difference in rank in the two men - Abel, the bourgeois, conventional and stupid, Cain, the starveling with wits and sensibilities sharpened by hunger. Baudelaire leaves us in no doubt as to which figure he prefers;

Race d'Abel, tu crois et brutes
Comme les punaises des bois.

...Race de Cain, ton supplice
Aura-t-il jamais une fin?¹⁵

and the poem ends with the blasphemous yet humanitarian wish to see a just world established by the destruction of the old tyrant, Jehovah:

¹⁴Note to "Le Reniement de Saint Pierre", Baudelaire, CE. comp., pp. 1414-1415.

¹⁵Baudelaire, OE. comp., pp. 191-192.

Race de Caïn, au ciel monte,
Et sur la terre jette Dieu!¹⁶

In "Les Litanies de Satan" Baudelaire sings the praises of "le plus savant et le plus beau des Anges", in an incantatory form which both Dr. Starkie and Milner attribute to Marie de Sens, one of the cases treated by Briere de Boismont in his book, Hallucinations, which was published in 1845. Marie de Sens confesses, in the book, that she was in the habit of reciting a litany to Satan. After the early commonplace account of the legends and gifts attributed to Satan, the invention of gun-powder, for example, and Satan's use of hope to torture the human race:

O toi qui de la Mort, ta vieille et forte amante,
Engendras l'Espérance, - une folle charmante!
O Satan, prends pitié de ma longue misère.¹⁷

we see the real reason for this extravagant praise. In the lines:

Père adoptif de ceux qu'en sa noire colère
Du paradis terrestre a chassé Dieu le Père.¹⁸

is there not a hint of that longing for peace which Baudelaire will find only during his final illness, together with the expression of a

¹⁶ Ibid... p. 192.

¹⁷ Baudelaire, "Les Litanies de Satan", CE. comp., p. 193.

¹⁸ Ibid... p. 194.

sentiment which caused Des Hermines to say, in là-bas: "Comme il est très difficile d'être un saint...il reste à devenir un satanique. L'un des deux extrêmes. - L'exécration de l'impuissance, la haine du médiocre, c'est peut-être l'une des plus indulgentes définitions du Diabolisme".¹⁹ There is, expressed in Baudelaire's lines, the nostalgia for the other extreme, the extreme of sanctity, which he had momentarily abandoned in favour of blasphemy. His desire for sanctity is constantly reiterated in Mon Coeur mis à nu, where he writes: "Être un grand homme et un saint pour soi-même, voilà l'unique chose importante".²⁰

A more striking use than blasphemy, to which Baudelaire put Satanism, was to complete his misogyny, by returning to the medieval conception of woman as the "instrumentum diaboli". Baudelaire's conception of love seems to suffer from a guilt-complex, possibly inherited from the quasi-incestuous relationship which he enjoyed with his mother before her second marriage. Original sin, in Baudelaire's view, has so stained man that, "la volupté unique et suprême de l'amour gît dans la certitude de faire le mal".²¹ Thus love becomes a "satanic" pleasure and a source of blasphemy. Milner writes: "le rôle satanique de la femme baudelairienne consiste à obliger l'homme à sortir de lui-même, à se "prostituer".²² The woman in "Les Métamorphoses du Vampire" plays the role of seducer. By her caresses, she induces man to fall into a complete state of self-abandonment:

¹⁹ Huysmans, là-bas, OE. comp., XII, 1, 85.

²⁰ Baudelaire, OE. comp., p. 1222

²¹ Baudelaire, Journaux intimes, OE. comp., p. 1191.

²² Milner, op. cit., II, 460.

Je suis, mon cher savant, si docte aux voluptés...
 ... Que sur ces matelas qui se pâment d'émoi,
 Les anges impuissants se damneraient pour moi.²³

After such pleasure, the guilt experienced by the sin-obsessed Baudelaire is proportionally intense, so that, instead of a beautiful woman, he now sees:

A mes côtés, au lieu du mannequin puissant...
 Tremblaient confusement des débris de squelette.²⁴

Even, as in this poem, where sexual pleasure is described in the most graphic detail, the point of the poem is a moral one; the woman's beauty is castigated because she uses it for the "satanic" purpose of seduction. Only in one prose poem, "Le Joueur généreux", do we find Satanism and Salvation treated ironically and the jocular nature with which Baudelaire wagers and loses his soul, should be enough to make Catholic critics wary of welcoming him to the fold. After describing how he follows Satan into his extremely comfortable lair in the bowels of the earth, the two fall to gambling. Baudelaire continues:

...je dois dire que j'avais joué et perdu mon âme, en partie liée, avec une insouciance et une légèreté héroïques. L'âme est une chose si impalpable, si souvent inutile et quelquefois si gênante, que je n'éprouvais, quant à cette perte, qu'un peu moins d'émotion que si j'avais égaré, dans une promenade,

²³ Baudelaire, Les Epaves, OE. comp., p. 219

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Baudelaire, OE. comp., p. 327.

ma carte de visite.²⁵

Later in the anecdote Baudelaire's impertinent irony bursts forth in the paragraph describing the relationship existing between God and Satan:

Encouragé par tant de bontés, je lui demandai [à Satan] des nouvelles de Dieu, et s'il l'avait vu récemment. Il me répondit, avec une insouciance nuancée d'une certaine tristesse: "Nous nous saluons quand nous nous rencontrons, mais comme deux vieux gentilshommes en qui une politesse innée ne saurait éteindre tout à fait le souvenir d'anciennes rancunes."²⁶

This story, together with the "exercises in blasphemy" which form the section on revolt in Les Fleurs de Mal, belong, by their flavour, to the work of the early Baudelaire of the eighteen-forties, and the solution to his misery which he sought in Satanism did little or nothing to satisfy him. His obsession with original sin and his almost puritanical remorse after pleasure were leading him to the final stage when he would find that his only peace came from a form of spirituality or mysticism, very close to orthodox religion.

11.) Huysmans and La-bas

Huysmans' interest in Satanism and the occult is ~~well~~ stated in his adoption of one of the last of Baudelaire's enthusiasms - the

²⁵ Baudelaire, Œ. compl., p. 327.

²⁶ Ibid., pp. 328-329.

morbid delight which he took from the illustrations of the Belgian artist Félicien Rops. Satanism will be for Huysmans, as for Baudelaire, the final step before the acceptance by both men of a form of orthodox belief. In his essay on Rops which appeared in the collection of essays on contemporary art, Certains, published in 1889, Huysmans made the significant statement: "pour être suraigué, toute oeuvre devrait être satanique ou mystique, car en dehors de ces points extrêmes, il n'y avait plus que des oeuvres de climat tempéré, de purgatoire, des oeuvres issues de sujets humains plus ou moins pleutres".²⁶ The use of Satanism as an æsthetic step, as a documentary source of material, had first been suggested to Huysmans in A Rebours. It was while Des Esseintes was studying the Diaboliques of Barbey d'Aurevilly that the Baudelairean and Manichean concept of a world at the mercy of two struggling powers first found expression in Huysmans' work, and before he was ready fully to accept the supernatural as a solution to his problem:

cette conviction que la vie humaine n'est plus qu'un incertain combat livré entre l'enfer et le ciel; cette foi en deux entités contraires, Satan et le Christ, devaient fatalement engendrer ces discordes intérieures où l'âme...finit par s'abandonner et se prostituer à celui des deux partis dont la poursuite a été le plus tenace.²⁷

²⁶ Huysmans, Certains, CE. comp., X, 82.

²⁷ Huysmans, A Rebours, CE. comp., VII, 240.

Again it is while he is speaking of the Diaboliques of d'Aurevilly that Huysmans qualifies sadism as "ce bâtard du catholicisme",²⁸ thus forming a worthwhile and more glamorous mystic pursuit for Des Esseintes than orthodox catholicism. The definition of sadism, (the terms sadism and satanism seem to be interchangeable in A rebours), which Huysmans gives, will serve to show the attractions which he, himself, found in that perverted form of behaviour. Unable at first to believe in God, as a result of the "demonstrations" of the supernatural in satanism, he would come at last to orthodoxy. The definition contains all the decadent glamour in which lay satanism's appeal for Huysmans:

La force du sadisme, l'attrait qu'il présente, gît donc tout entier dans la jouissance prohibée de transférer à Satan les hommages et les prières qu'on doit à Dieu; il gît donc dans l'inobservance des préceptes catholiques qu'on suit même à rebours, en commettant, afin de bafouer plus gravement le Christ, les péchés qu'il a le plus expressement maudits: la pollution du culte et l'orgie charnelle.²⁹

Finally in Huysman's résumé of the effect felt by Des Esseintes in his reading of Barbey's book, all the Baudelairean overtones of a "religion à rebours" are made manifest:

Après certaines pièces de Baudelaire qui, à l'imitation des chants clamés pendant les nuits de sabbat, célébraient des

²⁸Ibid., p. 241.

²⁹Ibid., p. 242.

litanies infernales, ce volume était...le seul qui témoignât de cette situation d'esprit tout à la fois dévote et impie, vers laquelle les revenez-y du catholicisme, stimulés par les accès de la névrose, avaient souvent poussés des Esseintes.³⁰

This influence of Baudelaire whom Helen Trudgian goes so far as to call "le seul maître de Huysmans"³¹, is felt as strongly in the essay on Rops in Certains. Baudelaire's Manicheanism is attributed also to Rops, the illustrator of Les Espaves, in whom Huysmans finds a taste for diabolism identical with his own:

Adoptant le vieux concept du Moyen Age, que l'homme flotte entre le Bien et le Mal, se débat entre Dieu et le Diable, entre la Pureté qui est d'essence divine et la Luxure qui est le Démon même, M. Félicien Rops, avec une âme de Primitif à rebours, a accompli l'oeuvre inverse de Memlinc; il a pénétré, résumé le satanisme en d'admirables planches qui sont comme inventions, comme symboles, comme art incisif et nerveux, féroce et navré, vraiment uniques.³²

The influence of Baudelaire here is obvious and that he was largely responsible for the parallel route taken by Huysmans is more than probable. Baudelaire's ideas on woman, too, can be seen in Huysmans' praise of Rops' illustrations for the Diaboliques. Baldick

³⁰ Ibid., p. 244.

³¹ H. Trudgian, op. cit., p. 176.

³² Huysmans, Certains, Cf. comp., x, 62-83.

comments on Huysmans' growing misogyny, but finds a more "natural" reason for it:

As a natural consequence of the frustration which Anna Meunier's illness caused him, he had become increasingly misogynistic in recent years, and this tendency was reflected in his writings. Thus in both A Rebours and En Rade, woman was represented as unclean and diseased.³³

Baldick goes on to quote from an article on Degas in Certains, in which Huysmans showed his contempt for woman by approving Degas' treatment of her, "en plein tub, dans les humiliantes poses des soins intimes",³⁴ in painting "ses attitudes grenouillardes et simiesques"³⁵, and in revealing the "humide horreur d'un corps au'aucune lotion n'épure".³⁶ Huysmans had already fully aired his misogyny in his novel En Ménage (1881), which was a cry of rage at womankind in general, whether wife or prostitute.

Even more Baudelairean is the development of his misogyny; like his illustrious predecessor, Huysmans, too, sees woman as the means by which Satan tricks and suborns mankind. Fraz sees in Pops' illustrations of woman an aim similar to that of Gustave Moreau, who, in his choice of subjects, depicted the fatal and decadent women of antiquity, Salome

³³Baldick, op. cit., p. 147.

³⁴Certains, OE. comp., X, 22.

³⁵Ibid., p. 23.

³⁶Ibid., p. 25.

and Helen: "his object, like that of Moreau, was to depict evil incarnate in woman - a portrayal which Rops intended to be satirical, but which owing to his excessive complaisance with the subject, he could not raise above the level of mere illustration, often pornographic."³⁷ Thus in Rops' pictures, woman, portrayed as an "instrumentum diaboli", pleases the same instinct in Huysmans for a perverse moral structure, based on contempt rather than humility, as that which had possessed Baudelaire. Huysmans qualifies woman, as seen by Rops, as, "le grand vase des iniquités et des crimes, le charnier des misères et des hontes, la véritable introductrice des ambassades déléguées dans nos âmes par tous les vices".³⁸

This taste for a morality "à rebours" which is peculiar to decadent authors is further expounded and explained by Huysmans in his definition of Rops' artistry:

Il a restitué à la luxure si naïvement confinée dans l'anecdote, si bassement matérialisée par certaines gens, sa mystérieuse omnipotence; il l'a religieusement replacée dans le cadre infernal où elle se meut et, par cela même, il n'a pas créé des oeuvres obscènes et positives, mais bien des oeuvres catholiques, des oeuvres enflammées et terribles...Il a, en un mot, célébré ce spiritualisme de la luxure qu'est le Satanisme, peint, en d'imperfectibles pages, le surnaturel de la perversité, l'au-delà du Mal.³⁹

³⁷Fraz, op. cit., p. 369.

³⁸Certains. OE. comp., x, 88.

³⁹Ibid., pp. 105-106.

Satanism served a dual purpose in the works of Huysmans, a purpose both aesthetic and mystical. It proved a further means of escaping from the "littérature sans issue"⁴⁰ of Naturalism, and, in the spiritual sphere, belief in the Devil led him to believe in God. In matters of aesthetics he was quick to note and assimilate the development of the figure of Satan by Baudelaire. Like Léon Bloy he was prepared to say:

La notion du Diable est, de toutes les choses modernes, celle qui manque le plus de profondeur, a force d'être devenue littéraire. A coup sûr, le démon dans la plupart de nos poètes, n'épouvanterait pas même des enfants. Je ne connais qu'un seul Satan poétique qui soit vraiment terrible. C'est celui de Baudelaire, parce qu'il est sacrilège.⁴¹

The terror inspired by the medieval idea of a monster rising from Hell was necessary in a novel in which the dark influence motivating the characters was to be neither laughable nor childish to a nineteenth century reader, accustomed to the philosophical positivism of Auguste Comte, and the "physiological" motivation of Zola's characters.

Lamenting the reduction of interest in the figure of Satan, the monster, he wrote in Certains, "la grande science de la symbolique religieuse n'est plus".⁴²

⁴⁰"1903 Preface to A Rebours". CE. comp., VII, XI.

⁴¹Léon Bloy, Dévélateur du Globe, p. 15. Cited by Trudgian, op. cit., p. 154.

⁴²Certains, CE. comp., X, 138.

Huysmans describes in the first six or eight pages of La-bas his own need to escape from the aesthetic of Naturalism. His attitude to Naturalism is divided among Durtal and Des Hermies who proceed to debate the matter. Des Hermies reproaches the Naturalists, "d'avoir incarné le matérialisme dans la littérature, d'avoir glorifié la démocratie de l'art"⁴³. Durtal himself, who has given up writing Naturalist novels and is engaged upon a study of Gilles de Rais, the fifteenth century Satanist, admits when Des Hermies has gone, that "le naturalisme confiné dans les monotones études d'êtres médiocres... conduisait tout droit à la stérilité la plus complète"⁴⁴. But as yet he sees only one solution, which is to use the discoveries of Naturalism regarding adequate documentation and the realist style, and at the same time to explore more deeply the human soul:

Il faudrait, se disait-il, garder la véricité du document, la précision du détail, la langue étoffée et nerveuse du réalisme, mais il faudrait aussi se faire puisatier d'âme, et ne pas vouloir expliquer le mystère par les maladies des sens; le roman, si cela se pouvait, devrait se diviser de lui-même en deux parts...celle de l'âme, et celle du corps, et s'occuper de leurs réactifs, de leurs conflits, de leur entente. Il faudrait, en un mot, suivre la grande voie si profondément creusée par Zola, mais il serait nécessaire aussi de tracer en l'air un chemin parallèle, une autre route, d'atteindre les en deçà et les après, de faire, en un mot, un naturalisme spiritualiste.⁴⁵

⁴³Huysmans, La-bas, OE. comp., XII, 1,6.

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 10.

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 11.

His dissatisfaction with positivistic Naturalism and his desire to base his book on a sound documentation led him to write in the following terms to the ex-abbe Boullan, the mysterious, satanic figure who had such an influence on him:

Rien n'est expliqué des mystères qui nous entourent...que le diable existe, que le diable règne, que sa puissance du moyen âge n'est pas éteinte, puisqu'il est aujourd'hui l'Omniarque... Or pour avancer de telles choses, il me faut des documents certains, il me faut l'aide d'un homme supérieur au-dessus du temps, éloigné des enfantillages malsains et inquiétants des spirites et de l'immuable sottise des cléricaux. Cet homme ne peut être que vous.⁴⁶

Also in his characterizations, Huysmans follows, in la-bas, the anti-naturalistic pattern of A Rebours, even to qualifying Gilles de Rais as "le Des Esseintes du quinzième siècle".⁴⁷ Gilles' power as marshal of France is absolute on his domain and he is able to practise all the criminal perversions of decadence which Des Esseintes enjoyed merely in imagination. His boredom and lack of spontaneity come finally to the perversions of sadism and homosexuality and, again, like Des Esseintes, he has a fascination with religion, which takes the usual decadent form of Satanism. Alchemy and the Black Mass are the expressions

⁴⁶Letter dated 7 February 1890. Cited by Trudgian, op. cit., p. 255.

⁴⁷la-bas, OE. comp., XII, 1, 77.

which his mysticism takes and his only pleasure is in depravity. The continuation of certain of the perverse aspirations of Des Esseintes is obvious in this description of Gilles by Huysmans: "Du mysticisme exalté au Satanisme exaspéré, il n'y a qu'un pas... Gilles a transporté la furie des prières dans le territoire des à rebours."⁴⁸

Carter includes this portrait of Gilles de Rais in his review of decadent figures and concludes justly, "Durtal (i.e., Huysmans) was writing his own history backwards when he embarked upon Gilles de Rais: the Marshal went from orthodoxy to Satanism; it is not hard to see that his biographer must go from Satanism to orthodoxy - as actually happened four years later in En Route."⁴⁹

Durtal's own jaded appetites and desire for perversions lead him into the relationship with Madame Chantelouve, the other decadent figure in the book. The psychology of this character is almost totally explained in Satanic terms - she is a decadent because she is possessed. She feels the need to be continually in mortal sin, is subject to fits of hysteria, laughing and crying by turns - and needs the accompaniment of squalor and sacrilege to arouse her desire. For her perverted sexual satisfaction she practises the "incubat" for which, by diabolic influences, she summons whatever man she desires. Naturally, in such a woman, her choices include Baudelaire, Byron and Gérard de Nerval.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 82.

⁴⁹ Carter, op. cit., p. 93.

⁵⁰ La-bas, OE. compl., XII, 1, 246.

But it is in the mystical sphere that La-bas provides a fuller indication of the route which Huysmans was following. When he wrote, in the Preface to the edition of A Rebours published in 1903, that "il m'engageait dans une voie dont je ne soupçonnais même pas l'issue",⁵¹ he is seeing the whole of his works in the intervening twenty years in their logical chronological sequence. A few years after the publication of La-bas in 1891, Huysmans wrote to Firmin Van der Bosch that, "La-bas fut mon premier pas vers la religion; c'est par la vision du surnaturel du mal que j'ai eu, d'abord, la perception du surnaturel du bien. Ceci dérivait de cela".⁵² René Dumesnil also sees the seeds of conversion in Huysmans' concern with Satan:

Chez lui, même s'occupant de Gilles de Rais, c'est à elle [à l'Eglise] qu'il songe, tandis qu'il est cloîtré mentalement loin du brouhaha des lettres, dans le château de Tiffauges, auprès de Barbe-Bleu, et qu'il vit en parfait accord et presque en coquetterie avec le monstre.⁵³

Durtal in La-bas finds himself irresistibly drawn towards the church, a source of art and beauty, a refuge against the nineteenth century, but he is still unable to take the final, decisive step towards belief:

Il cherchait des consolations, des apaisements et il en était bien réduit à se dire que la religion est la seule qui sache encore panser, avec les plus veloutés des onguents, les plus

⁵¹ A Rebours, CE. comp., VII, XXII.

⁵² Cited by Trudgian, op. cit., p. 265.

⁵³ Dumesnil, La publication d' "En Route" par J.-K. Huysmans. (Paris, Edgar Malfère, 1931), p. 31

impatientes des plaies; mais elle exige en retour une telle désertion du sens commun, une telle volonté de ne plus s'étonner de rien, qu'il s'en écartait tout en l'épiant. Et, en effet, il rôdait constamment autour d'elle.⁵⁴

Here, Huysmans is obviously describing his own hesitations before manifestations of the supernatural in Satanism enabled him to believe in Catholicism.

Jules Lemaitre was in no doubt as to the proximity between Satanism and Huysmans' final conversion, when he wrote in his review of La-bas:

Le pessimisme et l'impureté, à leur dernier degré d'exaspération, c'est le satanisme, ou la luxure blasphématoire. M. Huysmans est allé jusque-là, du moins par la curiosité inassouvie de l'imagination (La-bas). En réalité, il était déjà "en route". Car lorsque l'on croit à Dieu assez pour le maudire, c'est bien simple: autant l'adorer. La messe noire est proche de l'autre messe, puisqu'elle en est le contraire; et le désespoir satanique peut engendrer la divine espérance.⁵⁵

Thus the literary careers of Baudelaire and Huysmans have followed the same stages from the dandy, to the decadent who sinks to Satanism. It might be possible to argue that the apparently conscious progress made by Huysmans came because he was following the route which he could see that Baudelaire had followed in his spiritual wanderings. That Baudelaire had an aesthetic influence on Huysmans, he himself allowed in A Rebours; perhaps too, he sought to arrive consciously at the same conclusions as his great predecessor. The last solution to which they had recourse,

⁵⁴ La-bas, Op. com., XII, 1, 21-22.

⁵⁵ Les Contemporains, Septième série (Paris, Lecène, 1903), p. 118.

a kind of spirituality, forms the theme of the next chapter.

Chapter IV

SPIRITUALITY

i. Baudelaire et "L'Imprevu"

If we are to attempt to fit Baudelaire's pilgrimage from dandyism to a kind of spirituality into the chronology of his life, let us, together with many critics, choose the year 1851 as the great water-shed in Baudelaire's thinking. In 1848 Baudelaire had found himself embroiled in the Parisian revolt and had floundered even more deeply in financial difficulties, all of which reduced the time which he was able to give to his art. But in 1851, after the 'coup d'etat' of Louis Napoléon, idealism seemed to go out of politics once more, with the result that Baudelaire, together with most other writers, turned away in disgust from political matters.

Of the period 1851 to 1857, the period commencing with a new and wider range of interest in his poetry and ending with the publication of the first edition of Les Fleurs du Mal, Dr. Starkie writes:

Here spiritual preoccupations replaced interest in politics, when, under the influence of Swedenborg, he formulated his aesthetic doctrine, and composed his great spiritual poems such as "Bénédiction", "Les Phares" and "Correspondances".

It was then too, that he composed his spiritual love poems which are in great contrast to the sensual love poems of the first period. This was the moment of his greatest subtlety in prosody. In this period also he wrote his greatest literary and artistic criticism. It was a time of belief in himself, and of confidence in the future.¹

This, then, is the period of the mature Baudelaire; the period in which we may say he expressed himself most fully and when his poetry was at its most finished. But it was also the period when his concern with sin and man's unhappiness arising as a result of sin was at its highest. This nagging concern with the concept of original sin which he inherited from his Catholic education had dogged him from his earliest literary beginnings, and it was thanks to this concern that the peace he came to know at the end was the more sublime.

It was his sense of sin which made life intolerable with Jeanne Duval. After the fury of sensual hunger which she aroused in him, he was smitten with remorse, with the soul-searchings of which Pascal Pia writes:

Au cours de cette liaison sans cesse rompue et renouée,
Baudelaire eut mille occasions de pester contre la sottise
de sa maîtresse... Pour Baudelaire, que les défaillances de
sa foi n'ont nullement délivré du sentiment du péché, la
chair s'identifie avec le Mal; aussi l'amour et le devoir sont
-ils antinomiques.²

¹Starkie, op. cit., p. 19.

²Pia, Baudelaire par lui-même, (Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1952),
pp. 45-46.

This preoccupation with original sin finds its fullest expression in the Journaux intimes, of which Fusées belongs, according to Le Dantec, to the period 1851-1853.³ It is in Fusées that Baudelaire qualifies love as that "épouvantable jeu où il faut que l'un des joueurs perde le gouvernement de soi-même".⁴ A similar preoccupation fills Mon Coeur mis à nu, which belongs to an even deeper period of despair, 1862-1864, than that which followed the establishment of his "conseil judiciaire" in 1844. Here the "crime" of love - a conception based on belief in original sin expressed in terms of an almost English puritanism is castigated because: "Ce qu'il y a d'ennuyeux dans l'amour, c'est que c'est un crime où l'on ne peut pas se passer d'un complice".⁵ His attacks on the "civilizing" influences of nineteenth century materialism were again due to his refusal to believe that man's moral nature showed any improvement, or indeed that man himself was capable of any such improvement: "Théorie de la vraie civilisation. Elle n'est pas dans le gaz, ni dans la vapeur, ni dans les tables tournantes. Elle est dans la diminution des traces du péché originel".⁶

But this is the negative side of a morality. How did Baudelaire seek, in his writings, to solve the dilemma which his sense of ever-impending disaster found in the contemplation of "le gouffre"?

³Baudelaire, OE. comp., p. 1504.

⁴Ibid., p. 1191.

⁵Baudelaire, OE. comp., p. 1217.

⁶Baudelaire, Ibid., p. 1224.

The seeds of his yearning to find an answer in spirituality to the disgust inspired in him by nineteenth century life, are to be found in his stoical realization of the Dandy-Saint, the man apart. Disgust was the main emotion inspired in him by his exploration of the decadent sensibility, a revulsion sharpened into revolt during his flirtations with Diabolism - which is, after all, but religion "à rebours". As he himself wrote in his "dédicace" to Théophile Gautier which first appeared in Le Parnasse satyrique du dix-neuvième siècle (1864): "le blasphémateur confirme la religion".⁷

But Baudelaire's first attempt to resolve for himself the problem of sin was to be aesthetic. It was at the time of his readings of Poe's views on the nature of life and aesthetics that he first became acquainted with the works of Swedenborg - first mentioned by him in 1847 in La Fanfarlo. The poem "Correspondances" springs directly from his readings of Swedenborg. But the doctrine of the poem is not simply an aesthetic one, in which "les parfums, les couleurs et les sons se répondent"⁸, but a means by which man may read the signs which will reveal to him the secrets of life itself. Starkie's summary of the philosophy of "correspondences" is worthy of quotation:

Everything in this world is merely a symbol, and these symbols are the language of nature, a hieroglyphic language, in which every material form expresses an idea...The philosopher is the

⁷Baudelaire, CE. comp., p. 1379.

⁸Les Fleurs du Mal, OE. comp., p. 87.

man who can see beyond the concrete images, beyond the mere shell into the heart of things. The true thinker will be the man who can decipher the hidden writings of nature and interpret the mysterious book of the universe.⁹

With this preparation in philosophy the need he felt for his poems to express an implicit moral aim was strengthened, and one can understand his bewilderment at the trial for obscenity in 1857, when his aim was ignored and only the exterior of his "fleurs malades" was examined.

The moral nature of Les Fleurs du Mal has by now been accepted by critics in view of Baudelaire's frequent statements on his aims. One such is in an article he wrote on the poetess Marceline Desbordes-Valmore:

Je me suis toujours plu à chercher dans la nature extérieure et visible des exemples et des métaphores qui me servissent à caractériser les jouissances et les impressions d'un ordre spirituel.¹⁰

He was himself fully aware of the moral tone of Les Fleurs du Mal and even went so far as to class the inspiration of the book as "Catholic". After hearing from his mother that her confessor had burnt a copy of Les Fleurs du Mal, which he had sent to her, Baudelaire wrote on April 1, 1861: "enfin il n'a même pas compris que le livre parlait d'une idée catholique".¹¹ But the final and most striking avowal of

⁹Starkie, op. cit., p. 228.

¹⁰Baudelaire, OE. comp., p. 1100

¹¹Baudelaire, OE. comp., (Conard) XVI, 266.

this nature comes in a letter to Maître Ancelle of February 15, 1866. In this letter we sense the despair of a "mind at the end of its tether", weary of repeating time after time that his aim was not pornographic:

Faut-il vous dire, à vous qui ne l'avez pas plus deviné que les autres, que dans ce livre atroce, j'ai mis tout mon coeur, toute ma tendresse, toute ma religion (travestie), toute ma haine? Il est vrai que j'écrirai le contraire, que je jurerai mes grands dieux que c'est un livre d'art pur, de singerie, de jonglerie; et je mentirai comme un arracheur de dents.¹²

Did Baudelaire ever come to a genuine acceptance of the doctrines of Christianity? The answer to such a question can only be partially affirmative; it is perhaps most just to say that he chose from the Christian ethic those doctrines which tended to explain to him his own spiritual preoccupations.

He was profoundly aware of the inexorable passage of time and convinced by the Church's doctrine on idleness, and waste of time. Thus, he writes of time in "L'Ennemi":

-O douleur! Ô douleur! Le Temps mange la vie,
Et l'obscur Ennemi qui nous ronge le coeur
Du sang que nous perdons croît et se fortifie!¹³

¹²Baudelaire, OE. comp., (Conard), XVIII, 279.

¹³Baudelaire, OE. comp., p. 92.

In "L'Horloge" he erects the symbol of the clock whose relentless ticking counts away the seconds of his life. Despite all man's attempts to escape pleasure, be it in vice or virtue, "le gouffre a toujours soif".¹⁴ His obsession with sin and his own seeming unworthiness led him to the point where he was afraid to sleep, so great was his fear of "le gouffre". This sentiment of emptiness, darkness and despair was to invade his thinking to such an extent that it tinged his views on everything, and it was to escape from the void presented by the pagan conception of death that he began to pray:

Au moral comme au physique, j'ai toujours eu la sensation du gouffre, non seulement du gouffre du sommeil, mais du gouffre de l'action, du rêve du souvenir, du désir, du regret, du remords, du beau, du nombre, etc.¹⁵

In "Le Gouffre" he wrote:

J'ai peur du sommeil comme on a peur d'un grand trou,
Tout plein de vague horreur, menant on ne sait où;¹⁶

and it was to escape the fear of death that he began to pray again, as appears from this quotation from Mon Coeur mis à nu: "L'homme qui fait sa prière le soir, est un capitaine qui pose des sentinelles. Il peut dormir".¹⁷ And in Fuseés, he wrote: "Le chapelet est un médium, un véhicule; c'est la prière mise à la portée de tous".¹⁸ His struggle to

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 153.

¹⁵ Mon Coeur mis à nu, OE. comp., p. 1233.

¹⁶ "Nouvelles Fleurs du Mal", OE. comp., p. 244.

¹⁷ Baudelaire, OE. comp., p. 1236.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 1198.

believe in God was every bit as hard as that of Huysmans; for, as he wrote to his mother in May, 1861: "Je désire de tout mon coeur (avec quelle sincérité, personne ne peut le savoir que moi!), croire qu'un être extérieur et invisible s'intéresse à ma destinée; mais comment faire pour le croire?"¹⁹

Meanwhile this desire to "monter en grade" is largely responsible for the contrast between the erotic poetry written to Jeanne Duval and the cycle of spiritual love poems addressed to "La Vénus blanche", Madame Labatier. Also the Dandy's scorn for others becomes softened, and a genuine care for down-trodden common people and for life's failures is substituted. Baudelaire would have liked to offer them a better consolation than the only one which awaited them:

C'est la Mort qui console, hélas! et qui fait vivre;
 C'est le but de la vie, et c'est le seul espoir
 qui, comme un elixir, nous monte et nous enivre
 Et nous donne le coeur de marcher jus qu'au soir;²⁰

Baudelaire also took up the doctrine of contrition - or remorse as he referred to it - particularly in his treatment of the "Paradis artificiels" created by drugs. Speaking of hashish and opium he indicated the remorse felt by their users and pointed out that there was a certain immorality inherent in the surrender of one's will-power:

¹⁹Baudelaire, OE. comp., (Conard), XVI, 280.

²⁰Les Fleurs du Mal, OE. comp., p. 195.

L'analyse des effets mystérieux et des jouissances morbides qui peuvent engendrer ces drogues, des châtements inévitables qui résultent de leur usage prolongé, et enfin de l'immoralité même impliquée dans cette poursuite d'un faux idéal, constitue le sujet de cette étude.²¹

This sentiment regarding the immorality of the use of drugs was repeated in his notes for a lecture in Brussels in May 1864:

...je veux faire un livre non pas de pure physiologie, mais surtout de morale. Je veux prouver que les chercheurs de paradis font leur enfer, le préparent, le creusent avec un succès dont la prévision les épouvanterait peut-être.²²

Also at the end of "Le Poème sur le Haschisch" Baudelaire adopts a completely orthodox position with regard to stimulants, even going so far as to adopt the form of a quotation from the New Testament to illustrate their evil and pernicious character:

Mais l'homme n'est pas si abandonné, si privé de moyens honnêtes pour gagner le ciel, qu'il soit obligé d'invoquer la pharmacie et la sorcellerie; il n'a pas besoin de vendre son âme pour payer les caresses enivrantes et l'amitié des houris. Qu'est-ce qu'un paradis qu'on achète au prix de son salut éternel?²³

Flaubert was too subtle a thinker not to notice that Baudelaire was here writing what amounted to an apology for some aspects of

²¹"Le Poème du Haschisch", OE. comp., pp. 439-440.

²²Baudelaire, OE. comp., p. 552.

²³Les paradis Artificiels, OE. comp., p. 477.

Catholicism, for he wrote to Baudelaire:

Il me semble que dans un sujet traité d'aussi haut, dans un travail qui est le commencement d'une science naturelle, dans une oeuvre d'observation et d'induction, vous avez (et à plusieurs reprises) insisté trop (?) sur l'Esprit du Mal. On sent comme un levain de catholicisme çà et là. J'aurais mieux aimé que vous ne blâmez pas le haschisch, l'opium, l'excès. Savez-vous ce qui en sortira plus tard.²⁴

Baudelaire also came round to accepting the Church's position on the existence of sin and evil in the world, and this acceptance, which is the hardest, perhaps, brought him a peace which the same acceptance would bring Huysmans. The most sublime expression of Baudelaire's acceptance of suffering as a gift rather than a curse from God comes in the poem "Bénédiction":

Soyez béni, mon Dieu, qui donnez la souffrance
Comme un divin remède à nos impuretés
Et comme la meilleure et la plus pure essence
Qui prépare les forts aux saintes voluptés!

Je sais que la douleur est la noblesse unique
Ou ne mordront jamais la terre et les enfers,
Et qu'il faut pour tresser ma couronne mystique
Imposer tous les temps et tous les univers.²⁵

²⁴Cited in Les Paradis artificiels, O.E. comp., (Conard), IV, 309.

²⁵Les Fleurs du Mal, O.E. comp., p. 85.

In "Les Phares" Baudelaire regarded suffering as man's debt, his means of self-redemption from his state of spiritual degradation. In this he has gone beyond the Christian ethic - which teaches Christ as the redeemer - and has adopted a species of stoicism to which, ever since his religion of dandyism, he had always been prone. The poem ends with an echo of Vigny's stoicism as expressed in "La Mort du Loup":

Car c'est vraiment, Seigneur, le meilleur témoignage
 que nous puissions donner de notre dignité
 que cet ardent sanglot qui roule d'âge en âge
 Et vient mourir au bord de votre éternité.²⁶

It is also by means of suffering that Baudelaire, in his final statement on salvation, the poem entitled "L'Imprevu", written in 1863, was finally able to accept redemption. The first five stanzas of the poem, which was dedicated, significantly enough, to Barbey d'Aurevilly, pass in review the sins of the world. Harpagon's avarice is balanced by Célimène's coquetry, then follow two statements on hypocrisy, literary and spiritual. The clock in stanza five testifies to approaching death, and then the figure of Satan arises to bear off the sinner to his damnation. But at that moment this vein of deep pessimism is broken by the appearance of a saviour:

-Cependant, tout en haut de l'univers juché,
 Un ange sonne la victoire

²⁶ Ibid., p. 90.

De ceux dont le coeur dit: "Que benî soit ton fouet,
Seigneur! que la douleur, ô Père, soit benîe!
Mon âme dans tes mains n'est pas un vain jouet,
Et ta prudence est infinie."

Le son de la trompette est si délicieux,
Dans ces soirs solennels de célestes vendanges,
Qu'il s'infiltré comme une extase dans tous ceux
Dont elle chante les louanges.²⁷

Thus, finally, Baudelaire was able to put his trust in God and he himself noted this and expressed it, as ever, with his ubiquitous irony: "Ici l'auteur des Fleurs du Mal se tourne vers la Vie éternelle. Ça devait finir comme ça. Observons que, comme tous les nouveaux convertis, il se montre très rigoureux et très fanatique".²⁸

With this poem can be seen the distance Baudelaire has travelled on his "spiritual pilgrimage", and it is unnecessary to seek fully to reconcile his solution with the rigid code of ethics of one cult; rather than enter the controversy over Baudelaire's reception of the last sacraments and Nadar's contention that on his death-bed he "expressed" complete trust in God, let us say, with Starkie: "It is possible to believe that Baudelaire found at last in religious peace the "renonciation totale et douce" of which Pascal wrote on the night of his great spiritual experience!"²⁹

²⁷Baudelaire, "Pièces diverses", CE. comp., p. 231.

²⁸Note to "L'Imprevu", CE. comp., pp. 1425-1426.

²⁹Starkie, op. cit., p. 454.

ii. From En Route to L'Oblat

The most striking aspect of Huysmans' novels is their autobiographical nature - it is interest in the man himself which ensures that his books are still read, just as it is predominantly interest in the man which holds together the society which helps to keep alive his memory. Thus the lonely bachelor figure at the centre of each of his novels is mainly interesting from the light which it sheds on Huysmans' own spiritual development. The artist, Cyprien Tibaille, of Les Soeurs Vatar and En Menage, is endowed with Huysmans' own misogyny. M. Folantin of A Vau l'eau is afflicted with Huysmans' delicate stomach, unable to find a suitable restaurant, one which will cater for, it must be admitted, his often unreasonable demands. In Des Esseintes, in whom the influence of Baudelaire is manifest, we find an illustration of the first two stages, dandyism and decadence, through which the two writers passed in their search for a solution to their pessimism and accompanying dissatisfaction with nineteenth century life. The solution which both men chose was in spirituality; the distance which they travelled, and the various proposed solutions which they essayed, remain as monuments to their unswerving purpose and, let us add, to their ingenuity.

A Rebours is the fullest orchestration of Huysmans' pilgrimage, for besides those aspects of Dandyism and decadent life which are crystallized in the figure of Des Esseintes, the book exudes the sulphurous odour which will tinge la-bas, and the road to Rome is already evoked in the hero's constant preoccupation with the Catholic religion through the medium of its art and liturgy. Huysmans himself noted this in the celebrated preface to the 1903 edition of the book

when he wrote: "Tous les romans que j'ai écrits depuis A Rebours sont contenus en germe dans ce livre. Les chapitres ne sont, en effet, que les amorces des volumes qui les suivirent".³⁰ Speaking more specifically of La-bas in the same preface, he notes that, "les idées énoncées dans le chapitre VII d'A Rebours, sur le sacrilège, sont le hameçon d'un futur roman traitant le sujet plus à fond".³¹ And further, summarizing the Catholic influence which was to be described in his novels from En Route onwards, he writes of A Rebours: "Ce livre fut une amorce de mon oeuvre catholique qui s'y trouve tout entière, en germe".³²

In La-bas, we have seen how the cult of Satan served a dual purpose for Huysmans - both aesthetic and spiritual- and the same was to be true of En Route. The need for blasphemy and Diabolism is balanced in La-bas by the interest which Durtal takes in Church architecture and liturgy, both of which provided a means of escape from the detested nineteenth century in which flourished "l'américanisme nouveau des moeurs".³³ His interest in Gilles de Rais is partly due to what A. E. Carter has called the "time-exoticism" common to decadent writers; that is, the desire to escape from reality into the more congenial atmosphere of another age. One illustration of this desire which occurs in the works of both Baudelaire and Huysmans is their common interest in the works of the Latin decadents, Petronius and Apuleus, for instance, and

³⁰ Huysmans, CE. comp. VII, XIV.

³¹ Ibid., XVII.

³² Ibid., XXI

³³ La-bas, CE. comp., XII, 1, 6.

their fascination with the monstrous emperors of the Claudian family. Huysmans' other preference in past ages was for medieval times, an account of which is given during the description of the study which he made of Gilles de Rais. Both these themes - love of Church art and a predilection for the Middle Ages - received expression in En Route, the final stage which we shall deal with in this outline of Huysmans' spiritual development.

En Route "ce livre qui tranche en deux ma vie"³⁴, this was the thought which Huysmans wrote on the copy which he gave to René Dumesnil, who develops the metaphor thus:

Ce roman marque un sommet, ou plutôt une ligne de partage entre deux vallées. D'un côté, tous les ouvrages antérieurs, et c'est le côté profane; de l'autre, les oeuvres catholiques, celles qu'il écrira après 1893, et qui sont orientées vers la lumière de la foi: La Cathédrale, L'Oblat, Sainte Lydwine de Schiedam, Les Foules de Lourdes, Trois églises trois primitifs... Par le nombre et par l'importance des oeuvres, les deux versants sont pareillement riches.³⁵

En Route, then, divides Huysmans' work into the profane and the catholic, but the unifying factor, which ensures that the thread of a development remains easily discernible, is the mode of expression, their common Naturalism. For it must not be imagined that Huysmans ever abandoned the documentary techniques of Naturalism. He simply passed, as Henri

³⁴ Cited by Lucien Descaves in his note to En Route. Huysmans, OE, comp., XIII, 2, 317.

³⁵ Dumesnil, op. cit., p. 35.

Bachelin has aptly noted, "du Naturalisme littéraire au Naturalisme mystique"³⁶, to which later Durtal had occasion to refer in La-Bas as "un naturalisme spiritualiste"³⁷.

Thus one finds in En Route a complete and factual description of life at the Trappist monastery, Notre-Dame d'Igny, even to the noting of the regulations which Durtal sees affixed to the wall of his cell, and the reproduction of the time-table with which retreatants were expected to comply. Dumesnil says of Huysmans' method:

Les descriptions d'En Route sont d'une exactitude quasi-photographique: pas un détail qui ne soit la transcription minutieuse de la réalité; pas un portrait qui n'ait été brossé d'après nature, avec ce souci réaliste du vrai qui caractérise l'art de Huysmans. Visitant l'abbaye avec En Route pour guide, on y retrouvait tout ce qui, dès l'abord avait séduit le romancier, comme aussi tout ce qui lui avait déplu.³⁸

This aesthetic factor, plus Huysmans' avowed aim to publish a book in direct contrast to La-bas, led many contemporary critics to see his conversion as a literary pose. Even l'abbé Mugnier, to whom Huysmans had been introduced by Berthe Courrière, was at first inclined to doubt

³⁶H. Bachelin, J.-K. Huysmans, Du Naturalisme littéraire au Naturalisme mystique. (Paris, Perrin, 1926).

³⁷Huysmans, OE. comp., XII, 1, 11.

³⁸Dumesnil, op. cit., p. 68.

the sincerity of the Naturalist writer who said to him in their first interview:

Je vais publier en volume, un livre satanique, plein de messes noires. Je veux en faire un autre, qui sera blanc. Mais il est nécessaire que je me blanchisse moi-même. Avez-vous du chlore pour mon âme?³⁹

These considerations may have been partly responsible for the failure by so close an acquaintance as Henry Céard to assess at its true value the effect made upon Huysmans by his stay at Notre-Dame d'Igny; for Céard wrote in Le Matin of the 2nd March 1895:

L'homme...a pu s'humilier et se plier un moment aux douces domesticités de la foi. L'artiste, par contre, n'a rien cédé de sa liberté et de sa magistrale habitude d'écrire. Parce qu'en décrivant la splendeur des pompes catholiques... il a trouvé sur sa palette d'écrivain des couleurs de style plus éclatantes encore que les couleurs admirées dans ses autres livres; parce qu'il a fait dans En Route un travail de haute littérature ayant l'éclat d'une verrière de cathédrale, on a faussement pris pour conversion ce qui est seulement un nouvel effort de son talent et de son art...Je ne crois pas Huysmans plus converti que Villon.⁴⁰

Such evaluations were to continue for a number of years, until it became obvious to all the doubters that Huysmans was in fact sincere.

³⁹Cited by Dumesnil, Ibid., p. 47.

⁴⁰Cited by Dumesnil, Ibid., pp. 94-95.

The description of the moment of conversion by Huysmans, to choose only one example from En Route, illustrates Pierre Cogny's statement that "tout, dans En Route a été vu, entendu, vécu".⁴¹ Huysmans wrote:

Il n'y a pas eu de chemin de Damas, pas d'événements, qui déterminent une crise; il n'est rien survenu et l'on se réveille un beau matin, et, sans que l'on sache ni comment, ni pourquoi, c'est fait... quand je cherche à m'expliquer comment, la veille incrédule, je suis devenu, sans le savoir en une nuit, croyant, eh bien! je ne découvre rien, car l'action céleste a disparu, sans laisser de traces.⁴²

In an attempt to explain his conversion, Durtal sees three contributory factors: "l'amour de l'art, l'hérédité, l'ennui de vivre".⁴³ Appropriately his love of art, especially Church art, and his disgust with modern living, which led him to praise medieval life, are treated in the book and in his later works.

Huysmans' love of art and his obsession with the liturgy find expression continually in En Route; Durtal says: "Je suis hanté par le catholicisme, grisé par son atmosphère d'encens et de cire, je rôde autour de lui, touché jusqu'aux larmes par ses prières, pressuré jusqu'aux moelles par ses psalmodies et par ses chants".⁴⁴ Huysmans

⁴¹Cogny, op. cit., p. 152.

⁴²Huysmans, En Route, OE. comp., XIII, 1, 32-33.

⁴³Ibid., p. 33.

⁴⁴Ibid., p. 30.

returns to describe more fully the pleasure which he, in the guise of Des Esseintes, had taken from plain-chant in A Rebours:

Créé par l'église, élevé par elle, dans les psallettes du moyen âge, le plain-chant est la paraphrase aérienne et mouvante de l'immobile structure des cathédrales; il est l'interprétation immatérielle et fluide des toiles des Primitifs; il est la traduction ailée et il est aussi la stricte et la flexible étoile de ces proses latines qu'édifièrent les moines, exhaussés, jadis, hors des temps, dans des cloîtres.⁴⁵

There is also an interpretation of Durtal's taste in architecture in En Route which will be more fully developed in La Cathédrale, in which the magnificent medieval symbol of Chartres Cathedral is painted in all its differing shades of majesty, recalling Monet's paintings of Rouen Cathedral in all its different lights. Here the symbolism of the cathedral, leaning on Hugo, prefigures William Golding's treatment of aspiration as portrayed in Church architecture in The Spire. Of his intention in writing La Cathédrale, Huysmans wrote to Dom Besse on July 18, 1895:

Je voudrais compléter En Route par une étude sur la peinture religieuse et les cathédrales, faire les primitifs, et donner toute la symbolique des couleurs, ainsi que toute la symbolique des pierres...Les architectes et les archéologues ne font, en somme, dans leurs écrits, que le corps des cathédrales, et il faudrait maintenant en montrer l'âme.⁴⁶

⁴⁵Ibid., p. 14.

⁴⁶Cited by Cognly, op. cit., p. 180.

And again, writing to another priest, Père Facheu, on April 21, 1895, he explains that La Cathédrale is to be a pendant to En Route in which novel he had not been able to describe all the beauty which he had found in his study of the art inspired by religion:

Quant à La Cathédrale, dont vous me parlez, c'est un livre de transition...Il n'est qu'un simple complément d'En Route, en somme. Dans ce dernier volume, je n'avais pu faire entrer toute la grande symbolique du Moyen Age, ni l'architecture, ni la peinture. Ce faisant, j'aurai à peu près fait tout l'art admirable de l'Eglise, ce livre n'est donc que cela; Durtal installé à Chartres, auprès de la cathédrale, à mi-route du cloître.⁴⁷

It is in La Cathédrale too that Durtal-Huysmans summarizes his debt to art in bringing about his conversion:

Il n'avait que cela pour lui, mais il l'avait au moins, l'amour passionné de la mystique et de la liturgie, du plain-chant et des cathédrales! Sans mentir et sans se leurrer aussi, il pouvait, en toute sécurité, s'écrier! "Seigneur! j'ai aimé la beauté de votre maison et le lieu où habite votre gloire."⁴⁸

As well as the aesthetic beauties for which En Route is noted, the book has always been regarded as Huysman's first firm step towards Catholicism or spirituality and as such its place is justified in this chapter. Cogny writes of the place which the novel occupies in the

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 181.

⁴⁸ Huysmans, La Cathédrale, OE. comp., XIV, 1, 124.

account drawn by Huysmans of his "spiritual pilgrimage: En Route était le document d'une conversion, l'étude expérimentale d'une âme qui, après de longs détours, des reculs et des doutes, revient à Dieu".⁴⁹ Dumesnil also places the book at the head of the works which will fully describe Huysmans' Catholicism: "En Route, à tout prendre, n'est littérairement qu'une des parties de cette tétralogie, là-bas, En Route, La Cathédrale, L'Oblat dont le titre général pourrait être celui qu'adopta dans le même temps Adolphe Retté: Du Diable à Dieu".⁵⁰ While Eugène Montfort places En Route more directly in the line which begins with A Rebours:

Le naturalisme de Huysmans finit en naturalisme spiritualiste. D'A Rebours à En Route, à La Cathédrale, son oeuvre raconte l'histoire intérieure d'un homme, et d'un homme d'une originalité certaine. Document psychologique en même temps que peinture des petits côtés d'une époque. Il existe dans Huysmans un goût de la sincérité, de la véracité, qui, uni à son inquiétude, émeut.⁵¹

Thus Huysmans has reached his spiritual goal, just as did Baudelaire, who, after many years of searching, also found that peace which Huysmans was only fully to enjoy in his oblature at the Abbey of Saint-Martin de Ligugé in 1900. What it was easier for Huysmans to see ahead in his search for certainty, thanks partly perhaps to the example of Baudelaire, is a point to which we shall return in the conclusion.

⁴⁹ Cogny, op. cit., p. 188.

⁵⁰ Dumesnil, op. cit., p. 125.

⁵¹ Eugène Montfort, Vingt-cinq ans de littérature française, I, 260-263. Cited by Dumesnil, op. cit., p. 131.

CONCLUSION

It has been my intention to show that Huysmans and Baudelaire, whose work the novelist praised so highly in the preface which he wrote for Theodore Gannon's Rimes de Joie, as early as 1881, and whose influence is so manifestly apparent in A Rebours, in particular, took the same path to find a solution to their world-weariness. The means by which this parallel search is expressed is to be found in the works of each, and I have chosen to emphasize the four most salient features of their systems of aesthetics. For the study of Baudelaire, the work which tells us most, apart from the psychological descriptions of the Journaux intimes, is Les Fleurs du Mal, and each of the four stages through which Baudelaire passed is treated in those pages. For Huysmans the work of capital importance is A Rebours, for in that novel, and in the controversial figure of Des Esseintes, is to be found the first conception and primary development of the four phases with which we have been concerned in this study.

We have seen how Baudelaire and Huysmans both shared the identical stages of a development which brought each to the same conclusion - the need to accept spirituality. Another partial affinity which they possessed was in the realm of aesthetics, for when Baudelaire wrote in 1859-60:

Tu m'a donné ta boue et j'en ai fait de l'or.¹

¹Baudelaire, Œ. compl., p. 250.

he was giving expression to a thought which would unite, to an extent, their artistic intentions. The statement describes the paradox inherent in the title of Les Fleurs du Mal, and echoes the Baudelairean sentiment that "Le beau est toujours bizarre".² But it also has particular relevance in describing the technique of Naturalist writers, whose intention was precisely to extract beauty from everyday reality and even from ugliness or squalor. The statement is in fact the fullest apology for the "tranche de vie" school, in which the sensibility of the artist could distil beauty from what at first seemed closed to art.

Thus from the comparative study of Baudelaire and Huysmans the fact emerges that, both in their lives and their writings, the two men followed a parallel course: by way of Dandyism and the temptations of decadence and Satanism, both came, finally, to a proper understanding of the Christian religion. So close indeed are the parallels, that it might not be completely fanciful to argue that Huysmans, who praised so highly the work of Baudelaire and whose novels, particularly A Rebours, reveal the direct inspiration of his predecessor's writings, consciously chose to seek his own salvation by the very means which Baudelaire himself employed.

²Ibid... p. 691.

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