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## **LES FLEURS DE MALADIE: Baudelaire's Mother and "Writing Cure," 1860-1866**

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*Shelley Salamensky*

Sensualist, satanist, troubador of the life of the streets and the brothels, urban savage, salon wit, absolutist aesthete: Charles Baudelaire holds a special place in French popular culture. Films and plays depict a suave, womanizing rake: in the film *Les Fleurs du Mal*, "Baudelaire" flings noblewomen to the ground to have his way with them; in a one-man show, "Baudelaire" sips champagne, laughs with his head thrown back and caresses women in the audience. Condemned for obscenity in France, he has come over time to embody France, or a certain reading of France, the France of libertine life and art. Yet his letters to his mother reveal another Baudelaire. Among the letters, those written during the final stages of his illness are most provocative.

1860 marks Charles Baudelaire's thirty-ninth year and the first seizures he is to experience in the course of the syphilis which will cripple and kill him six years later. He is greatly unnerved by the incident, frequently indicated as a turning-point in his life; it also marks a turning-point in the letters to his mother. Caroline Aupick, a general's widow, lives in somewhat diminished circumstances in the family's former summer home at Honfleur. During his last years Baudelaire writes her more frequently than before—often daily, sometimes twice daily. In these later letters the cavalier voice of the poet gives way to that of a child: fragile, cranky and wracked by fear that his mother might not really love him.

As in his own time, Baudelaire is read not simply for Baudelaire-the-poet, but Baudelaire-the-man, or, often, more-than-man: the myth, the flesh-made-metaphor. Crucial to any study of Baudelaire's *œuvre* or biography is examination of the mother of the myth: less Caroline Aupick, the general's wife, than the mythical mother. In his later period, in fact, the two converge: the letters constitute by far the greatest part of his *œuvre*. The letters themselves, and particularly those from 1860-66, serve as a form of exploration of the figure of the mother. She appears, in these letters, to govern both the realms of illness and of narrative, and to dominate all structures of cure and narrative ending. The letters,

if not the poet, the man, and the myth, may be read through these configurations of the mother and "writing cure" by letter.

Charles's letters vacillate between effusive affection and accusation. Mme Aupick's letters are fairly unexceptional, featuring mainly remonstrances for Charles's underproductivity and overspending, inquiries after his health, local gossip, requests for Parisian goods, and pithy pieties; she is at once proud of her son's growing fame and scandalized by his work, most of which she refuses to read. In his letters, Charles rarely acknowledges his symptoms as those of syphilis. Often he locates their source in fasting forced upon him by financial straits, faulting his mother for what he considers his ascetic subsistence. At other points he takes the blame upon himself, and avows a program of more effective work habits as a form of voluntary self-discipline. It is difficult to determine Baudelaire's awareness of the cause or implications of these complaints, as in various letters he implores colleagues to direct him to a doctor who can ascertain what is wrong with him, and in others indicates that he is, in fact, fully cognizant of the nature of his malady.

Throughout the letters, Charles vows to rejoin his widowed mother in Honfleur; following the death of his despised stepfather and the separation from his long-term mistress Jeanne Duval, returning home has been, he writes, his only dream. He never succeeds in reaching Honfleur despite many opportunities, although he does pass through once on the train. Near the end of his life, his mother offers several times to travel to him, but is always rebuffed. Finally, bedridden in Belgium, one side paralysed, Charles continues to correct proofs, conduct business and announce travel plans. His final letter is written in March 1866. He dies seventeen months thereafter, aphasic and paralyzed, Mme Aupick by his side.

In the course of the letters after 1860 a gradual shift may be seen to occur, from Charles's self-described hypochondria to what might be called "hyperchondria"; physical complaints decrease in frequency and are limited to documented syphilitic symptoms.<sup>1</sup> Even late into his illness, he conceals from Mme. Aupick, friends and seemingly himself the actual extent of his difficulties:

As for the palpitations and stomach pains, they're gone....  
Moreover, there's nothing original in my condition. Several

French people have been attacked by this diarrhea, which I attribute to the climate and the drinking of faro [a cheap beer]. (31 July, 1864; 2: 392)

In a general manner, I'm in excellent health, seeing as I never had an illness at all. That I suffer a few disabilities, rheumatisms, neuralgias, etc., what does it matter? It's the common lot. (22 August, 1864; 2: 397)<sup>2</sup>

In these letters, it is as though the body, converted into the word in the poetry, may in turn be altered through the word.

The letters, like his poetry, tend to transform illness and the body into metaphor; in one, Charles writes, "If ever a man was ill, without its having anything to do with medicine, that man am I" (25 December, 1857; 1: 437). However, the later letters also increasingly emphasize illness and the body *as such*, *Charles's* illness, *Charles's* body. As the situation becomes desperate, the once obsessively private poet even writes of his illness to colleagues. Illness may be seen, in Elaine Scarry's terms, to enact Charles's body's "making," its conceptual coming-into-being, as well as its "un-making," both as death and as destruction of the metaphorical body. The figure of the mother—the metaphorized mother—is tied to this process, in the logic of the letters, as origin and end.

As Charles's illness unmakes his body, his body demetaphorizes, materializes, and reveals itself to companions, to his public, to his mother—and mostly to the reader equipped or encumbered with historical hindsight. The tragedy of the letters composes itself less within the text than in the consciousness of the retrospective reader, in his or her awareness that Charles is dying of syphilis while Mme Aupick is dying of old age. The letters form an alternate *œuvre*, another *histoire*, concurrent with and finally overtaking his official *œuvre*. Perhaps some of the pathos of this story, for the reader—the party best positioned to assemble the text as story—derives from the movement from weakness, illness, death and the body as public metaphor to the private fact of corporeality as "the bottom line," the place where all metaphors stop.

Susan Sontag's exploration of the rewriting of AIDS through metaphor suggests notions and uses of syphilis in the case of Baudelaire. Syphilis, as evident effect of a pre-troped cause, lends itself especially well to metaphorical conceptualization; long concealed within the body, the "social disease" is eventually a reveal-

ing condition, the indisputable record of its cause. The simple physicality of syphilis is at once masked by, and exposes, its attendant discourse. Sontag calls for a new socio-medical discourse—one which would resist interpretation—yet fails to note one issue central in this case: the rewriting of metaphor through illness via the body's own veto of metaphor. Baudelaire's letters position illness-as-metaphor and illness-as-such in dialectic. In one wrenching instance, not long before his paralysis, Charles, in *Mon cœur mis à nu*, presents his malady as simple lazy decadence; lapsed virtue is no longer cited simply as the cause of physical disease, but as the disease pinning the physical body to the bed. For the modern reader, the popular mythicization of Baudelaire's body comes into play as well; the cultural constituent, in becoming a reader of the letters, must herself engage in the intimate process of deciphering Baudelaire's metaphorical body into a physical body.

Issues of the metaphorical body, in this correspondence, are often doubled as issues of the letter—the representative body, the stand-in for presence. The erotics of the epistolary are, of course, well-noted.<sup>3</sup> The letter may also be seen to reflect various bodily functions—here, as a means of transmission:

If I write you today, it is only to tell you, to repeat how uneasy I am over the effect my letter is going to have upon you. The more I think about it, the more afraid I am that I have pained you....  
(4 August, 1860; 2: 70-71)

In this letter, the act of communicating information parallels the act of communicating disease. Charles anticipates the effect, phrased in physiological terms, that his previous letter will produce upon his mother; his concern is largely with the consequence of the letter's arrival, the letter's material aspect as ersatz presence of the writer. In this case, the writer makes a second appearance before the first is complete; he writes "only...to repeat," to replicate the doubts of the previous letter, though at the moment of this letter's writing, it is unclear whether the previous letter has yet had its effect, or any effect. In some respect this insistence upon the letter's effect might be read as resounding with hope for success in the effort to affect or infect (as in Charles's self-described "affection verolique," [6 May 1861, 2: 152]); this tone echoes through the following letter: "And when you don't write me, I imagine you're



unhappy, out of sorts, ill, etc." (8 October, 1860; 2: 95). When Mme Aupick fails to reply to a letter, infirmity is anxiously, perhaps ambitiously, inferred. Charles beseeches her to write, to share her illness, to re-communicate it to him as cure, where "cure" enacts, on the level of the signifier, a healing of the Oedipal split. The diseased penis sheathed from discussion, illness is communicated, nonetheless, by the diseased pen. In reviewing his life, Charles returns repeatedly, if not obsessively, to the mother:

To tell you the truth, I need to be saved, and it is you alone who can save me. (6 May, 1861; 2: 152)

Can you believe what a great memory I have? Long walks, constant acts of tenderness.... Oh, for me, that was the good age of maternal tenderness.... I lived constantly through you; you were mine alone. (6 May, 1861; 2: 153)

I'm deathly bored; my great distraction is thinking of you. My thought is always turning toward you. I see you in your bedroom or parlor working, walking, moving about, complaining and reproaching me from afar. And then I see anew my childhood by your side. (23 December, 1865; 2: 553-54)

Similarly, discussion of illness in the letters often displays a logic of return to the mother: "For many months I have been ill, of an incurable malady, of weakness and enfeeblement.... To add to my sadness and disgust, I have made you sick" (21 August, 1860; 2: 84). Illness, shared with Mme Aupick by letter, effects an almost bodily bond, reminiscent of an earlier one.

Return to infancy, of course, as inverse of death, may in some way be positioned as its antidote; in addition, fears of death as the loss of individual consciousness and/or the ultimate individualization—in a later version of Jacques Lacan's "mirror stage" scenario—may be benignly recast as the similar ambiguities of the mother-child union. Significantly, in the later letters, General Aupick and Jeanne Duval, the posited causes of the mother-son estrangement, remain almost completely unmentioned. Elision of these dual infidelities to the Oedipal promise, as well as Charles's post-childhood—sexual—state, may be seen to strengthen the circular structure, conceivably enhancing the aura of return in the letters. This discourse, from which Charles's stepfather and lover

have been expunged, recalls the childhood state predating the mother's disapproval and Charles's fatal—sexual—error.

Return to ordinary innocence and to the mother's approval also figure in Charles's pursuit of cure. Illness, in its particularity as syphilis, appears in the letters as adulteration, inscription, artifice, incompleteness, versus a cure imaged as purification, erasure, essence, end. The taint, Charles insists in one letter, may be washed away through three months of scrubbing baths to purify a man, as well as purgatives, poisons, fasting, and "rye bread at all my meals", a curious Host (8 May, 1861; 2: 161).<sup>4</sup> To Charles's physical self-punishment is added moral self-castigation, echoing Mme Aupick's characteristic criticisms of him—though it is Charles himself who connects her critique to illness by taking it up as a cure:

I know that I am completely cured, and that I am a miserable creature made of laziness and violence, and that habit alone can serve as a counterweight to all the vices of my temperament....  
(3 June, 1863; 2: 300)

Resolution in the sense of planning may often be seen to stand in for resolution in the sense of ending or cure; declaration of intention often functions, in the dynamic J.L. Austin that traces, as a form of contract whereby future action is to be bartered for present approbation (158). In this case, the speech-act's ersatz fulfillment of the promise by promising is further enhanced by the substantiality of the letter-act. Moral reform, signed, sealed and mailed, appears here, on some level, as a *fait pré-accompli* to be rewarded.

Moral, and not bodily, cure is, it would seem, the ultimate object; if bodily cure is an object, it is by way of moral cure and thus cure of the Oedipal split. Neither is Charles's body, apparently, his illness' final goal: "You have passed a bad night, thanks to me. Thus I was very wrong in telling you of my infirmity..." (10 February, 1866; 2: 593). Neither is Charles's own imminent end the endpoint of his teleology. The story is incomplete without the death of the mother. The narrative's ultimate destination, both in the sense of addressee and end, is also the origin: the mother.

Yet under the terrible circumstances in which I've been placed, I am convinced that one of us will kill the other, and that finally we will kill each other reciprocally. After my death, you will no

longer live—that's clear. I am the only object which makes you live. Especially if you died on account of a shock caused by me, I would kill myself—that's undoubtable. (6 May, 1861; 2: 150-51)

Mme Aupick appears, in the logic of the letters, as both cure for and conclusion of her son's illness, and her death as both conclusion of and cure for her son's story; D.A. Miller's observations on novelistic strategies of closure in response to narrative disorder are no less valid here.

Where illness and narrative share the quality of undecidability, cure may be seen to serve as conclusion, and vice-versa. Cure through death and narrative ending, indeed, seems the only solution at points when all living options are presented as untenable:

You're told I'm doing well? Not one of my infirmities has left me... nor fear above all, the fear of dying suddenly; the fear of living too long, the fear of seeing you die, the fear of falling asleep, and the horror of waking up.... (13 December, 1862; 2: 273-74)

Cure, death and narrative closure may be situated at once as ending and as arrival at the plot's teleological object. If arrival, achieved through the death of the mother and the conclusion of the narrative, were, in fact, the letters' simple hope, Charles's story might be said, in some sad way, to have a happy ending. Yet, paradoxically, the notion of arrival at all proves, itself, quite problematic. From 1860 to 1866, letter after letter declares Charles's longing to see his mother at Honfleur, a few hours' journey from Paris: "What longing I have to be in my room! ... But sometimes I become so sad, I fancy I'll never see Honfleur again" (8 August, 1864; 2: 394). "I will make only this cruel reflection, that I was crazy not to have spent these last years close to you. I deprived myself criminally of these last years" (30 May, 1865; 2: 504). Plans for the trip are repeatedly made; the letters arrive, but Charles never does, despite travel through Honfleur and to Belgium. "I'm going to come. I've already taken the necessary steps, by which I mean to say I've made it impossible for me not to leave by the end of the month" (10 August, 1862; 2: 253). "[My] goal [is] to settle down at Honfleur by the end of June..." (30 May, 1865; 2: 504). He cannot die before returning to Honfleur, he writes frequently, for either sentimental or practical reasons: "There is one thing which should



reassure you. I can't kill myself without having put my affairs in order. All my papers are at Honfleur in a great confusion" (6 May, 1861; 2: 151). Logically, then, if Charles does not return to Honfleur, he will not die. Mme Aupick's offers through the years to travel to Paris, and later to Belgium, are declined.

My good dear mother, I did the greatest wrong in speaking to you of my Belgian health, since that so adversely affected you. Has anyone ever seen a mother of your age willing to set out on the road simply because her son has a stomach ruined from a bad climate! (22 August, 1864; 2: 397)

Home and mother are incessantly figured as answers to the indecidabilities of illness and life, yet all choices which might render them actualities are rejected.

Charles's attachment to France itself displays a similar conflict; having exiled himself to Belgium, a land he originally idealized as refuge from a despised France—"I'm going to flee the human face, but above all the French face" (10 August, 1862; 2: 254)—as promising a final career triumph, Charles writes:

They say (and I believe it today) that the other nations are even stupider than the French. Then it is necessary to return to live in France, despite the idiocy of that land, or go to the other world. (21 February, 1866; 2: 620)

The letters' construction of France as final destination might be read as significant less in France's being-as-France than as not-Belgium, its being-as-where-Charles-is-not. However, he fails to move back to France of his own volition. This continual movement of displacement/denial/deferral reflects that in relation to home and, particularly, the mother, whom Charles essentially tells, "Don't come," a paradigm which might be viewed in relation to Baudelaire's rumored and confessed fear or repugnance toward sexual completion.<sup>5</sup>

In terms of narrative, it may be seen that consummation of desire, as arrival at destination, must collapse the correspondence. As Peter Brooks notes, "Stories are told for purposes, to establish a claim on the listener's attention, an appeal to hearing, which is also an appeal to complicity..." (61). Correspondence, as narrative genre, necessarily constructs an imaged, perhaps idealized, audience out of the letter's recipient. When the mother of the letters

expresses disagreement, the hope of the real mother remains. Charles complains to his mother that she does not read his letters carefully enough, and that hers contain "numerous errors and false ideas that a conversation could set right"; however, the correspondence continues, and the conversation is not to be had. The threat of the correspondence between Charles and his mother failing is that Charles and his mother might fail to correspond. Perhaps, also, it is only within the parameters of the letter that Charles may linger between life and death, evading the consequences of either. As Maurice Blanchot observes of suicide: "Having death within reach, docile and reliable, makes life possible, for it is exactly what provides air, space, free and joyful movement: it is possibility" (97). Within the space of possibility afforded by any narrative whose ending must be death, multiple, contradictory desires may arise, be teased or fulfilled and still retain the driving power of *sed non satiata*. Cure, ending, arrival are ardently sought, and avoided, in play against a later certainty.

In the letters from 1860 on, Charles generally gives work as the reason that he cannot travel to Honfleur or return to Paris; however, discussion of work itself seems to resonate with the logic of inconclusion. As his illness progresses, Charles produces less and less. Yet, as late as 1865, he continues to grasp at the notion of work, like the notion of the mother, as salvation: "The important thing is to take on the habit of work, and to make of this disagreeable companion my one pleasure" (23 December, 1865; 2: 554). By March of 1866, he has lost the use of one side of his body. Mme Aupick's offers to come to Belgium are matched by friends' offers to finance his trip back. All are refused on the basis of work. Yet, at this point, he cannot work; he literally cannot write. "The doctor who has the kindness to write under my direction implores you *not to get excited* and tells me that in a few days I'll be ready to take my work back up again" (23 March, 1866; 2: 629). The letter above may be seen to attempt to function as healthy proxy; if Mme Aupick believes the letter representing Charles as on the mend, within the world constructed by the letter, he will be. Writing, in the letters, and of the letters, has long stood in for cure, as if, through writing about or around sickness and death, through the manipulation of language, the material might be marshalled under control. Writing's wordiness may be seen in opposition to death's silence, particularly in the case of the letter, which doubles writing's materiality

in against the threat of divestment of representation. Before slipping into a more disabling paralysis and the aphasia which will prevent even dictation, Charles dictates one final letter. It is to his mother.

The response relayed Monday arrived to you Tuesday night. Wednesday, Thursday and today Friday, you should have been able to send me your news; if you haven't done it, it's that you suppose that I don't worry but about myself. ... It is absolutely necessary that you send me your news. ... I received one letter from [family advisor Ancelle] which tells me he's coming soon. This is pointless, at least premature. ...

1st Because I'm in no state to budge;

2nd Because I have debts;

3rd Because I have six towns to visit... I don't want to lose the fruit of a long labor....

I am, moreover, prepared to return as quickly as possible. Write me at length and in minute detail about yourself. I embrace you with all my heart. (30 March, 1866;2: 632)

Writing cannot, finally, cure him of the body; the body now cures him of writing. However, the narrative does not, in fact, end there. Charles survives for another seventeen months, during which Mme Aupick arrives. He lives unable to narrate, unnarrated but for the words of his mother, who writes to his friends and colleagues in his place. At times she professes the wish to nurse him to the end; at others she complains of his bizarre behavior and postpones his removal to Honfleur, ashamed on account of the neighbors (Richardson 464). Charles does finally die in his mother's arms, after which she writes of her dream of their other-worldly reunion (10 June, 1868; Richardson 497). Their story might be told by way of many different narratives, some more useful than others.<sup>6</sup> However, in the letter Baudelaire might have penned, return to the mother, unattainable in life, arrives with death—but more so—is achieved through narrative, where the poet, the man, the myth—and his mother—meet.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Dandyistic tendencies are also presented as medically motivated; the bohemian life of the Quartier Latin was, for instance, deemed unsalutary, in contrast to the elegant Ile St.-Louis (Starkie 56). Also see Sartre on Baudelaire's "fear" of nature and cult of sterility.

<sup>2</sup> All translations my own.

<sup>3</sup> See Kaufman.

<sup>4</sup> See Sontag on the "fight" against disease.

<sup>5</sup> See Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Baudelaire*, (Paris: Gallimard, 1975).

<sup>6</sup> See Jacques Lacan on certitude and the Imaginary construct. *Speech and Language in Psychoanalysis*, Trans. and ed. Anthony Wilden, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1991) 11.

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Ce serait le moment de philosopher et de rechercher si, par hasard, se trouvait ici l'endroit où de telles paroles dégèlent. • Ce serait le moment de philosopher et de rechercher si, par hasard, se trouvait ici l'endroit où de telles paroles dégèlent. • Ce serait le moment de philosopher et de rechercher si, par hasard, se trouvait ici l'endroit où de telles paroles dégèlent.



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