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What Baudelaire Means to Me

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I first encountered Baudelaire as an A-level student. Sadly, the teaching of French at my school focussed more on language than literature. Compounded with the strangely affectless quality about the texts my teachers chose for us to read in class, it is a wonder I have much interest in French literature at all. At school, we drudged stolidly through passages of *L'Étranger* and *Thérèse Desqueroix* with little sense of excitement. That only came later at university, when a supplementary class on Flaubert's 'Un Coeur Simple' opened doors for me.

In comparison, the English teachers at my school were more inspired. So, strangely enough, it was as a student of English Literature that I first came across Baudelaire, as we pored over *The Waste Land* by T. S. Eliot. Tracking down fragments of quotation and pondering over snippets of allusion in class with other earnest teenagers seemed like a rich game or an elaborate crossword that we hoped to solve together. I haven't really stopped doing this since and I owe the teachers (Chris Barlowe and Sally Meyers) who corralled that unruly bunch of adolescents a significant debt for a life-long love of trying to figure out what's going on in texts.

As an engagement with Baudelaire, however, these first efforts were not particularly successful. For example, the opening section of Eliot's poem, 'The Burial of the Dead' ends by quoting loosely from the preface to *Les Fleurs du Mal*: 'You! hypocrite lecteur! – mon semblable, – mon frere!'¹ My teenage ears formed only the roughest idea of what was happening here. The effect seemed cacophony. What I saw and heard was part of a polyglot collage of quotations from languages and eras that were not familiar to me: French phrases jostled alongside demotic German ('Bin gar keine Russin') and the names of battles from ancient Greek history ('the ships at Mylae' [pp. 55-57]). Perhaps I caught a vague intimation that Eliot was channelling various voices from European poetry through his own writing, but little more.

I was, however, unwittingly and slowly becoming familiar with a particular canon formed from the writers that Eliot himself had encountered as a young man. And I was absorbing some very particular ways of understanding those writings. Encountering Baudelaire through Eliot undoubtedly shaped the way that I understood the French poet. And I suspect I may not be alone in this. Later in my studies, at university, I would learn to recognize more fully the contours of Eliot's literary vision and start looking beyond it to form my own tastes. I would understand how deeply personal his vision of Baudelaire was. Indeed, the process of canon formation, the development of taste and the discovery of writers with deep, personal significance are topics that Eliot himself wrote about in several places, most notably in 'What Dante Means to Me', first delivered as a lecture in 1950:

I think that from Baudelaire I learned first a precedent for the poetic possibilities, never developed by any poet writing in my own language, of the more sordid aspects of the modern metropolis, of the possibility of the juxtaposition of the matter-of-fact and the fantastic.²

Posthumously collected in *To Criticize the Critic* (1965), this essay provides an obvious retrospective gloss on several different aspects of *The Waste Land*. The intimation of 'poetic possibilities' in the 'modern metropolis' suggests that Baudelaire enabled Eliot to reconcile his nascent spiritual leanings with his experience of urban modernity. But it is also important to recognize the hindsight at work here: Eliot would write on several occasions about Baudelaire in the 1920s and 30s in ways that sought to reconcile his burgeoning Christian faith with his interest in the French poet. Notably in 'Baudelaire' (1930) he would use the French poet to ground his assertion that blasphemy is 'a way of affirming belief'.³ Baudelaire was undoubtedly important to Eliot's spiritual struggles before and after his public affirmations of Anglo-Catholic faith from 1928 onwards. But in 1922 *The Waste Land* struggled with affirmation in any form and it's important not to diminish that retrospectively through knowledge of Eliot's subsequent conversion.

Consider, for example, the address to the 'hypocrite lecteur' that Eliot quotes in 'The Burial of the Dead': closer inspection reveals that the 'poetic possibilities' activated by this allusion open

up complex frictions between English and French, both as languages and as poetic conventions. Baudelaire's poem may be less co-operative than it seems.

Note how *The Waste Land* stretches the original line, adding the address, 'you!'. This addition of an extra syllable makes the new line impossible within French classical prosody based around the alexandrine and unlikely in conventional English rhythmic forms. The presence of Baudelaire's poem is potentially disruptive from the outset. Early printings of Eliot's poem in the *Dial* and *Criterion* mark out Baudelaire's words in italics, but these have disappeared from subsequent printings. These disappearing italics also take with them a visual marker of linguistic difference, so that, as Christopher Ricks and Jim McCue point out, there may be momentary ambiguity about what language is being spoken: the first two words ('You! hypocrite') might be English. The ambiguity is only resolved when the line reaches 'lecteur' (p. 620).

'Mon semblable' may seem to modern ears indubitably French, but the word 'semblable' – describing some sort of similarity or likeness – is well attested in the English language. It dates back to 1400 and whilst the *OED* supplies few examples after 1700 (suggesting it is now obsolete), Shakespeare can be found using it five times. In English mouths, the medial vowel sounds of 'semblable' tend to be shorter and flatter, anglicising a word that is probably French in origin after all. Eliot's poem, then, may feel capable of dispensing with italics because of the way that the line seems to force readers into adopting a performative French accent to avoid falling flat in this way.

The rhythmic impossibility of Baudelaire's line as it features within *The Waste Land* is compounded by other minor changes that Eliot institutes in the punctuation of the original line. His addition of an exclamation after 'lecteur', alters the weighting of Baudelaire's line, which proceeds through a carefully iterative sequence of dashes and commas:

– Hypocrite lecteur, – mon semblable, – mon frère!⁴

Syntactically each part of this line (lecteur – semblable – frère) seems to carry equal weight, although it is also possible to construe them as culminative. So the reader has to decide whether Baudelaire is haranguing them with set of insults ('you hypocrite; you're just like me; you're my

brother’) or whether the line arrives at a sense of revelation (‘you hypocrite; we’re the same really; we might even be brothers!’). The balance of possibilities here is complicated further by the demands of French prosody, which requires that the reader sound the terminal ‘e’ of ‘semblable’. A regular reading of the rhythm here, as four units (hemistiches) of three syllables, would bleed ‘semblable’ into the final phrase:

– Hypocrit/ e lecteur, – / mon semblabl/ e, – mon frère!
 3 + 3 + 3 + 3

But a less regular rhythmic reading might seek to retain the semantic integrity of ‘mon semblable’ in line with the demands of the punctuation, starting a new hemistich only after sounding the final ‘e’:

– Hypocrit/ e lecteur, – / mon semblable, / – mon frère!
 3 + 3 + 4 + 2

This effect, known as a ‘coupe lyrique’, creates a rhythmic stumble that might contribute to the effect of revelation, but it is not inevitable.⁵ The reader has to decide how the line should be sounded. The process of decision-making required by these lines is an important means for Baudelaire to co-opt his readers into the broader exploration of moral and aesthetic compromise that characterises this preface and makes it such a fantastic point of departure for *Les Fleurs du mal* as a whole. The rhythm of the line and such ambiguities are vital to the ethics and politics of the poem, which also hinges upon whether the poetic speaker discovers likeness and proximity in his audience (‘we’re the same’), or refuses to exonerate readers from his own faults (‘you’re just as bad as me’).

Eliot’s version of the line might seem to trample all over this. Following on from the exclamation mark after ‘you’, the addition of a second exclamation mark after ‘lecteur’ may seem hectoring:

You! hypocrite lecteur! – mon semblable, – mon frère!

This catches the switch to a direct personal address in Baudelaire’s preface, which only emerges in the final couplet of the poem about ‘ennui’. Eliot’s version skips over the preceding verses, which

use the first-person plural ('La sottise, l'erreur, le péché, la lésine, | Occupent *nos* esprits' [emphasis added]).⁶ *The Waste Land* capitalizes upon this tonal shift for its own purposes, as if it were the condition of Baudelaire's poem and not a departure. But Eliot also repunctuates the line, so that it looks as though it contains two syntactic units rather than three: 'semblable' and 'frère' may become subordinate attributes of 'hypocrite lecteur'. Any sense of the unfolding of possibilities or identities is diminished.

But Eliot may have heard this sequence differently, for Baudelaire's line was a touchstone of sorts for him elsewhere. On 12 February 1926, he used it in a letter to his friend, colleague, and intellectual rival, John Middleton Murray: 'You are in some sort of purgatory, I am perhaps thoroughly damned. But that's one reason why I want to see you. And I always feel with you "mon semblable – mon frère"' (p. 620). Written from a place of misery, this letter confirms the central role played by Baudelaire in Eliot's spiritual tribulations. But even this is ambiguous: since this post-dates *The Waste Land* it is possible that Eliot is quoting his own allusion to Baudelaire here. Note the way he drops the 'hypocrite' part of the line, so that it becomes an affirmation of likeness and co-feeling. Eliot can hardly have been unaware that such co-feeling is at odds with the spirit of Baudelaire's poem, which is sly about the kind of brotherhood it suggests with readers.

Perhaps this explains something about *The Waste Land*. Its exclamatory tones ('You! hypocrite lecteur') are consonant with this whole final sequence of 'The Burial of the Dead', which is spoken by an un-named presence who addresses 'Stetson!' with a sequence of exhortations. This is sometimes read as an allusion by metonymy to the gruffly American identity of Eliot's compatriot poet, Ezra Pound, although Eliot's letter to Middleton Murray may suggest other biographical possibilities. Within the mythic scope of Eliot's poem, the speaker is linked to 'Stetson' through a shared experience of combat at the battle of Mylae in 260 BC. The exchange may be jovial ('What ho – brother!'), rather than hectoring; but equally 'Stetson' and the speaker may share some complicity in the deaths they have witnessed during their experience of combat.

This points to a further, final ambiguity that arises from Eliot's decision to remove the italics from these lines after the earliest printings. For it takes away one visual marker that these words represent a further level of quotation within the quoted speech at this point in the poem. This may make it unclear whether the speaker is supposed to be consciously quoting the French poet or whether Baudelaire's words are imagined as erupting *through* his mouth. Baudelaire may be absorbed into that wider polyphony in *The Waste Land* which also finds the sounds of a London pub modulating into lines from *Hamlet*. Is Baudelaire present at this point in *The Waste Land* because his poetry helps form some point of contact between the speaker and 'Stetson'? Or does *The Waste Land* contrive to echo Baudelaire's line here as a means of elevating a guilty complicity into poetry? Much of the power of Eliot's poem lies in a refusal to resolve such questions. An intrinsic truculence in Baudelaire's poem contributes to the unresolved conflicts at the heart of *The Waste Land*.

In this way, seemingly minor distortions to rhythm or punctuation in the original serve as points of friction or resistance between Eliot's poem and his source material that speak to the broader concerns of both. Certainly, Eliot's poem has shaped the way that I have read and re-read Baudelaire over the years. I will never know how differently I might have experienced his work, if I had encountered Baudelaire in a more thoroughly French context. Instead, my experience of both Baudelaire and Eliot continues to be shaped by such play of difference and likeness between linguistic and literary conventions.

¹ T. S. Eliot, *The Poems of T. S. Eliot – Volume 1: Collected and Uncollected Poems*, ed. by Christopher Ricks and Jim McCue (London: Faber, 2015), p. 57. Further references are cited parenthetically in the text.

² T. S. Eliot, 'What Dante Means to Me', in *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot – Volume 7: A European Society, 1947-1953*, ed. by Iman Javadi and Ronald Schuchard (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019), p. 483.

³ T. S. Eliot, 'Baudelaire', in *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot – Volume 4: English Lion, 1930-1933*, ed. by Jason Harding and Ronald Schuchard (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015), p. 157.

⁴ Charles Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Claude Pichois (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), p. 6.

⁵ See Clive Scott, *The Riches of French Rhyme* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), pp. 312-13.

⁶ Baudelaire, *Œuvres complètes*, p. 5.