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Terra Incognita: On First Reading ‘L’Invitation au Voyage’

Chris Waters

Autumn term, 1962, a South London (Boys') Grammar School: the Cuban Missile Crisis had just come to an end, but Planet Earth had not, which meant that I would, after all, be taking my A-levels in English, German, and French. C'est la vie.

French O-level had been taught – or rather, enforced – by an elderly irascible Scot, who kept a cane in his drawer, and never gave the slightest hint that French words could be combined to make French poems, which could in their turn be delicious, haunting – or even seductive. Grammar, dictation, and repetition were all.

Whereas Mr. B – our A-level master, much younger but nevertheless somewhat meticulous, and a little desiccated and ascetic in manner (he would have made a credible monk), revelled in his sonorous readings of Verlaine and Baudelaire – 'de la musique avant toute chose'.

Which is perhaps why, nearly 60 years later, I still have lines and stanzas from both poets echoing down my neural pathways – including the first half of 'L'Invitation au Voyage'. So why that poem, why those lines? In an adjacent and equally shabby classroom on other days, we were tuning in to the language of Keats and Hopkins – musical, sensuous, tortured, yes – and delicious to hear, if not to speak ourselves: boys were becoming blokes, and blokes did not emote (well, not until rock & roll said it was ok). What was clear, and what was irresistible, was the different order of noise those French words, phrases, lines and rhymes were making – and the different mouth-shapes needed to form them:

Mon enfant, ma soeur,
Songe à la douceur
D'aller là-bas vivre ensemble!

The vowels here were long and languorous and palatable – and *bien sûr*, more sexy. Keats and Hopkins could rhapsodize, but here with Baudelaire, it felt as though we were being allowed, encouraged, to trespass into an intimate and heady love-world. (Mr. B had told us something of

Jeanne Duval, and the relationship with Baudelaire, and she occupied a fairly lurid position in our adolescent imaginations.)

Là, tout n'est qu'ordre et beauté,
Luxe, calme et volupté.

I can still hear, still visualize Mr. B hypnotizing himself and us with that refrain, letting his guard down, for an instant or two living Baudelaire's dream. These poems were after all *Flowers of Evil*, and none of us had caught a whiff of that before. Keats and Hopkins were chaste and unrequited, whereas bad Baudelaire came in reeking of the street. Concoct all that into a smouldering dream of escape into some faraway perfection – and what was not to like?

But in terms of impact, what hypnotized/seduced in the language, simultaneously confused and unsettled us, in the emotions being conveyed, and stirred. If Jeanne was his fiery mistress, how could she also be his 'enfant', his 'soeur'? Why did Charles aspire to die with her in the Shangri-la which she resembled? And how could a woman resemble a country? This wasn't as clear as Donne's 'My America, my new-found-land' – this was somewhere 'oriental', nebulous, exotic – perhaps even imaginary! – so where on earth were we? And if he loved her, and she loved him – *o naïveté* – why does he say she has 'traitres yeux'? It all seemed so complex and contradictory. So what was the destination on the invitation? And then Mr. B had quoted (with some relish) Baudelaire's line 'La femme est naturelle – c'est à dire abominable'. This was shocking – both the relish and the misogyny! We were not equipped to agree or disagree – so did it then apply to our mothers, our sisters, the girls we wanted to meet and date?

I might have answers for some of these questions now, but beyond them all, what remain are the cadences and sonorities of a haunted and haunting voice. In comparing several English translations/versions of the poem for this piece, I am struck certainly by their inventiveness, but also by their pallor compared with the life-blood of the original – an obvious point, but it means that I am glad that we were not taught these poems through other people's translations, but had to de-code them sufficiently to find our way into them, and then still be able to savour the musical

energy and resonance of the original. All of course, with assistance from Mr. B. who, in the Easter term, issued his own Invitation to a Voyage, by organizing a sixth-form outing – a day trip from Folkestone to Boulogne – for most if not all of us, our first Channel crossing, first *dégustation*, first of many journeys in a long liaison, which will stretch well beyond Covid and Brexit.